

PROLOGUE

"I have suffered a blow to my pride on this, my day of coronation. My mother—may she rest well in the Mother's embrace—did her best to prepare me for the moment, but there is only so much even diligent warning can do to brace a man for such an experience. Witnessing that transformation, that revealing which I know now is granted only to the newly crowned sovereign of these great lands, is a thing which would shake even the greatest King or Queen to their core. I have been made to feel small, have been made to feel humble, in the presence of such a being, in the knowledge of her existence.

Still, after spending the evening in that creature's presence, learning of the truths of Viridian's past, I cannot pretend I suspect I will soon be more than a little grateful for her loyalty to me, to my family, and to my throne..."

-private journals of Malythus Reth al'Dyor, former King of Viridian

"A... A Queen, my Lord?"

First General Makkus Oren's question was not voiced with doubt, per se. Doubt would have insolent, and—given who the General was addressing—insolence was not something to be tolerated lightly. Still, Cassandra Sert couldn't begrudge the man the waver of uncertainty he spoke with, considering what it was they had just been told.

"The Queen, Makkus," Mathaleus Kenus al'Dyor answered evenly, obviously having expected some level of disbelief from his gathered retinue. "The *Endless Queen*, to be precise, though I've little patience for such gratuitous titles at the moment."

The King of Viridian was dressed at leisure—in sharp contrast to the men and women he'd ordered gathered in the great space of his private study—and was steadily stroking the form of his white cat, Shal, who'd curled herself up in his lap. He wore spun evening robes of black with purple accents, and Cassandra would have been willing to bet a bag of golden levers that his feet—hidden behind the body of the lacquered, gilded desk at which he was seated—were bare. His face—ordinarily bright and warm—was more gaunt than last she'd seen during a similar audience granted not a month prior, and she knew without asking that he was losing weight. The bags under his pale blue eyes, along with the reddish shadow of several day's beard, gave him the look of a man some decade older than his thirty-five years.

Cassandra had not expected Mathaleus to be idle—what with the wereyn hardly two weeks march north of Aletha—but the ruler of men looked to have been long working himself to the bone on little food and less sleep.

There was a cough, and an old, bent man at Cassandra's elbow spoke up wheezily.

"May I be so bold as to ask where you have obtained this information, my Lord?" Kentan Vale, the court's lead historian queried with a bluntness only age could allow for. "You'll pardon our...confusion...but—to put it mildly—this news is not of an ordinary nature. I can attest to the existence of magic and spellwork in this nation's past, but these are banished arts, cast aside by the wisdom of one of your eldest ancestors. To make mention of it in this day and age is... well..."

He left the suggestion unspoken, trusting the rest of the gathered to follow his thoughts.

Madness, Cassandra finished privately, not wholly disagreeing.

Still...Mathaleus had never been one to play at games.

"I've this intelligence directly from the mouth of a source I would trust my life on, along with that of every man, woman, and child in this kingdom." Despite his appearance, the King spoke with a firmness which belayed his obvious fatigue, still absently running his left hand—index finger glinting with the gold band of the al'Dyor signet—over Shal's ivory fur. "They, in turn, did not share this with me lightly. Weeks have they spent piecing hints together, but there can be no doubt now. Sehranya is a threat the likes of which Viridian has not seen in over half a millennia, and we *must* do our best to prepare accordingly."

Along the left side of the room, a figure stirred among the larger bodies of the men about her. Cassandra cast a careful glance in Sahna Ar'esh's direction, studying the King's spymaster as subtly as she could manage. The old woman, in a plain white tunic and grey robes that might have fit better in a nunnery or farm-hold, was—for once—distracted. Her weathered face was frowning at her Lord and master, grey eyes narrowed

warily beneath the short bangs of her cropped silver hair. Cassandra looked away as soon as she'd made her deductions, not wanting to be caught appraising the wily hag.

Whoever Mathaleus' "source" was, they were clearly not a part of Ar'esh's network.

Unsurprisingly, the King had caught the old woman's expression as well.

"Is a sovereign not entitled to a few of his own eyes out in the world, Sahna?" He tried a tired smile. "Fear not. You and your charges have my faith as well. There are merely a few family secrets I've not the right to share, even with you."

Cassandra raised an eyebrow at that. A secret the sovereign of Viridian couldn't share with his most trusted advisors?

Abruptly, she had a great desire to meet this mysterious informant, to know what kind of person could hold such a sway over the kingdom's greatest...

There was a movement in Mathaleus' lap, and Shal lifted her head to turn and take in the room with wide, dark eyes. Cassandra might have imagined it, but thought the cat's gaze lingered on her for a second longer than the rest.

Then another voice stole her attention back.

"But... how?" Ethena Oren spoke up from behind her older brother. The Third General looked somewhere between bemused and perplexed, clearly straddling the edge of disbelief and confusion. "Magic... A witch who can raise the dead... My Lord, if this is indeed all true, *how* do we prepare for such an enemy?"

"There is knowledge to be imparted," Mathaleus assured the woman with a nod of acknowledgment. "Lessons of the past to be learned, even if they are from an age before the time of our palace archives." He gave Kentan Vale a quick look, silencing the distinct start to an objection the historian had clearly been about to make. "Now is not the moment to share such things, however. I have already given you all much to consider."

"And swallow," Geven Kavel, guildmaster of the Seekers, muttered from behind Cassandra, only loud enough for her and the other company heads to hear.

"For now," Mathaleus continued, "you are dismissed. You are at liberty to discuss what I have said amongst yourself, but *do not* share a word of this with anyone beyond those in this room. Morale would not hold—in the Vigil *or* the populace—if word got out of what we are all facing. Is that understood?"

With diligent dips of their heads, every one of the dozen men and women stated their unified acknowledgment of the decree. No one would be fool enough to let slip so much of a syllable of the conversation, especially not with Sahna Ar'esh present to witness their gathered vow.

There was the *clunk* of a bar lifting, and behind the group Tenet Thrum and Behn Hald—two of the King's six personal guards—pulled open the heavy double doors which led out into the private corridor that would see them back to the main wing of the palace. As one the dismissed turned to leave, but before she could take more than a step, Mathaleus called after Cassandra.

"Sert. You and the other guildmasters stay a moment, if you would."

Cassandra stopped short, as did Geven Kavel, Brund Jalys of Stonewall, and Keth Holden of Holden's Guard. Tana al'Von, leader of the Grey Shields, had already been dispatched with her two thousand men as caravan guards for the supply train between Aletha and the gathering Vigil north of Thenus.

There was a moment of shared silence, the five of them waiting for the others to clear the study's threshold. A few of the departing—the Orens chief among them—looked back curiously at the guildmasters but made no objection. The King's business was the King's business, and Mathaleus was not the sort of ruler to need his advisors constantly whispering in his ear.

Once Kentan Vale limped out, leaning heavily on the offered arm of Second General Thurst Lohv, Thrum and Hald closed the study doors again with a dull *boom*.

"Updates," Mathaleus ordered simply as soon as it was quiet again. He rose up from behind the desk. Shal made not a sound as she was displaced from his lap, leaping down to the slatted floor with agile dexterity and padding along beside her master while he made for a silver-lined glass cabinet along the right wall and pulled it open.

Cassandra almost smirked when she saw that he was, indeed, barefoot.

"I've received word back from most of the Iron Wind outposts," she answered, watching the King pull open the cabinet doors and retrieve five fist-sized crystal glasses, along with a bottle of what looked like dark wine. "Evacuation of each of the northern cities has commenced, if not without issue."

“Oh?” Mathaleus sounded duly unsurprised while he poured a finger for each of them. “You mean hundreds of thousands of my subject *don’t* wish to leave their homes and flee everything they’ve ever known with nothing more than what they can carry in both hands? Color me *astounded*.”

Cassandra knew well the bitterness in the King’s voice, and understood it. It could not have been an easy decision to make, enlisting the help of the nation’s largest mercenary companies and tasking them with the hard job of seeing Ebadon, Ranheln, and Vasteel—along with every small community that could be found between them—forcefully abandoned by the residents. Indeed, as she accepted a proffered glass—each of the three men behind her doing the same in turn—Cassandra tasted a little of that difficulty herself.

“They ain’t makin’ anythin’ easy for us, to be sure,” Brund Jalys commented in exasperation, the signature slurring of his upbringing in Aletha’s slums almost harsh on the ears in the presence of the King. “My boys’ve been sendin’ letter after letter from the coast, tellin’ me how the merchant folk’ve been tryin’ to pinch the locals’ horses an’ carts so they can bring their goods with ‘em south outta Vasteel. Never mind the common folk barely got enough to live by as is. Fuckin’ pigs.” The large man paused, about to take a swig from his glass, remembering his company with a cautious look towards Mathaleus. “Beggin’ yer pardon, yer Lordship. Ain’t sayin’ all rich folk is like that. You’ve done well enough in my book, if’n it counts for anythin’.”

Mathaleus, for his part, gave a tired laugh, raising his own wine in Brund’s direction. “Cheers to that, Jalys my friend. To a King who’s done ‘well enough’.”

Cassandra and the others chuckled, lifting their glasses in turn and taking a swallow. The drink burned her throat, warming her from the inside out with an almost acrid sharpness.

It amused her that Mathaleus al’Dyor, to this day, preferred the cheap swill of the back-alley taverns to the fine distillations of his nobles’ vintners.

“Will you manage, though?” Mathaleus asked once the alcohol had settled, returning to the topic at hand. “Do I need to reassign the Grey Shields, or part of the Vigil?”

Cassandra glanced back at the three behind her, who all looked between themselves before shrugging in dismissive unison.

“Nay,” she finally told the King with a grim smirk. “We’ll manage just the four of us. The rabble might put up a fight, but the silver lining of the wereyn coming off the Tears everywhere is that no one can deny their presence anymore. They’ll bitch and moan about it, but we’ll get them all moving. If we need more hands, we can tap the smaller companies. It’ll be faster deploying them than a contingent of the army anyhow.” She tilted the drink at her sovereign. “We’ll be sending you the bill, of course.”

Mathaleus waved the comment away with a casual air only a man who had not once in his life had to count his levers and lehts could achieve. “Yes, yes, so be it.” He sighed, letting his hand fall and resting his chin on the edge of his glass. Under him, Shal wove her way through his legs, arching her back against the soft cloth of the man’s black and purple robes. “The lower cities are preparing to take in whoever they can. I’ve sent envoys to the borders of the Vyr’en, too, hoping to warn them of the evacuation, but Graces be damned if the Matriarch will ever receive them.”

“W-won’t that...cause its own troubles, my-my Lord?” Keth Holden asked tentatively. He was the youngest of them by far, having only recently taken over the guildmaster’s position following his grandfather’s retirement hardly four months gone, and this was only his second time before the King, and likely first addressing him directly. “If... If the *er’enthyl* see this mass movement towards their border as threatening in any way...?”

“War with the elves isn’t a concern,” Mathaleus said with a shake of his head, not looking at the man while he continued to stare at the ground. “This Queen, though...Sehranya.” He gave a frustrated exhalation, lifting his eyes to the ceiling as though the answer waited among the sculpted oak panels of the arched study. “*Sbe* is going to be trouble. *Sbe* is going to be a problem. What in the Mother’s good name we’re going to do about a witch like that, I’ve not even the faintest...”

Cassandra and the others said nothing, to a one understanding that the King was less speaking to them than he was voicing his own struggles and considerations. Indeed, after several seconds in which Mathaleus continued to stare upwards, he seemed to remember himself.

“Apologies.” He gave a polite cough, meeting their gazes again. “I find my mind wandering more and more frequently in these last few weeks.”

“Understandable, my Lord,” Cassandra said with a dip of her head. “I doubt you’ll hear any of us claiming we can imagine the sort of pressure you are under.” There was a mumbling of genuine agreement from the others, and Mathaleus nodded distractedly.

“Indeed...” he murmured distantly, lingering on some thought a moment more. Then, with another sigh, he gestured towards the study entrance. “I thank you for the information. See yourselves out, if you would.” He looked around them, towards his personal guard. “Thrum. Hald. You’re to take leisure as well. I’ve need for a bit of solitude, I think.”

With a collected nod and bow, all did as they were commanded. The guards opened the doors and stepped smartly out, followed by the guildmasters. Cassandra was the last to leave the chamber, but as Thrum and Hald sealed the room off behind her, she heard Mathaleus al’Dyor still muttering quietly.

“Do I think they believed me? Ha... The Mother can only hope...”

Then the doors *boomed* shut at her back, and as she and the other company heads moved quickly down the corridor, Cassandra frowned to herself in concern. It did not portend well for Viridian if their King was taking to talking to himself.

Then again, perhaps that boded more favorably than the chance the man had been speaking to his cat...

CHAPTER ONE

PLACEHOLDER TEXT.

• • • - PLACEHOLDER TEXT

Ryn knew only vaguely that he was falling.

It was a secondary concern, inconsequential against the pain, fury, and fear of the fight he had more directly on hand. In his great talons the drey thrashed, almost small despite its five-foot broad chest and some nine feet of height, but for all their difference in size the creature was a match for him and then some. Viciously-clawed hands tore at his scales, and each time a hooved foot caught Ryn in the chest it was like being struck across the ribs by a battering ram. The thing's leathery wings whipped about his face and eyes, obscuring his already-limited vision, and the broken juts of its uneven fangs shone bloody in its elk's head. Ryn's neck throbbed, a searing agony boiling through his shoulder and back from where his opponent had just ripped a mouthful of flesh from the place just below the curve of his jaw. He was paralyzed by the pain, and through the haze of it he realized that *this* was why he was falling, *this* was why he was hurtling down, down into the dark to be swallowed by the abyss beneath the earth.

Schlunk!

Ryn roared as he felt something long and thin, like the blade of a straight sword, tear into his side. The drey had taken further advantage of his moment of incapacitation to sink the cruel barb of its jointed tail as deep as it would go.

Still, with this new shock came clarity, and so it was with a blink or two of his white-gold eyes that Ryn's spirit returned to the fight with a vengeance.

CRACK!

With a slashing of one front leg, Ryn struck the thing across the side of the head. Any other creature would have been decapitated by such a blow, but the drey's doubtlessly imbued bones held firm, and only an antler snapped off to spin away into the whirling black. With a screech it returned the treatment in kind, tearing and slashing at him. They fell and tumbled and sank deeper, deeper into the black, faster and faster until the air screamed all around them. Blood and scale and fur were cut and ripped away, each of the pair taking it in turn to roar or scream in alternating pain and victory. First Ryn had the upper hand, then the drey, then Ryn again, this cycle repeating as endlessly as the emptiness that was engulfing them. Nothing existed to each but the other, as well as the firm, clear knowledge that one sole victor would have a prayer of walking away from this exchange alive.

When the moment of advantage came, therefore, Ryn didn't hesitate.

Sacrificing a front shoulder to a series of long, clawed gashes, he managed to wrap a hand about the drey's abdomen. It keened again, writhing under the pressure of his talons piercing its gut, pounding at his forearm with enough force to break the trunk of a small tree. Ignoring the hammering ache of each blow, Ryn managed instead to get his other front hand around its chest, finally pinning it somewhat steadily before him. Together they continued to tumble endlessly through the air, but finding itself before his great head, the drey changed tactics, scabbling and slashing at his face instead of his arms, trying and failing to get at his eyes.

With a thought, the magics in Ryn's blood flared to life, heat building in his throat and chest, and the blackness all around them fled with the shriek of passing air when his mouth began to glow white with the building of ivory fire.

Unfortunately, the drey were as intelligent as they were savage.

Forgoing its attempt to slash at him, the pinned beast instead reached down with both hands and took him by the bottom jaw. With a strength that belied its slighter frame, the thing wrenched Ryn's entire head up and away with a piercing scream. Unable to hold back the fire already roiling between his fangs, Ryn was forced to release the magic through teeth clamped shut by the restraining angle. The flames sprayed out in a tumbling fan around them, spilling by and across the pair of them in their plummet. It seared even Ryn's own hide, splashing across his black scales painfully and scorching the more delicate membranes of his wings. It was not

for nothing, however, that he had been gifted with primordial blood. The power in his veins repelled the broiling heat, refused it with the absolute firmness of a mountain unmoving in the lashing of a winter storm. The pain pulsed, then ebbed, fading as the fires ran their course, streaming off him like water over oiled cloth.

The drey was less fortunate.

Despite saving itself the greater calamity of taking the dragonfire full in the chest, the spilling of the magic was not so kind to its form, made more widely of fur and skin. It screeched and thrashed, letting go of Ryn's jaw in favor of scrabbling at its own hide, trying to bat and claw away the flickering white of the clinging magic. It managed it, barely, but not before half its face had all but melted away and its broad wings became nothing more than useless sheets, tattered with holes that smoldered and widened with the stink of burning skin.

Ryn took his chance, then.

He'd not had great opportunity to fly in the last seven of his eight centuries, and so it was with some difficulty that he struggled to get his bearings. Through the pain he did his best to focus, the confusion of his swirling direction not helped by the spinning tumble into the black. Ryn's mind battled with gravity as the pair of them twisted, trying to capture which way was up. He failed again and again, and in his grasp the drey's attention had turned back to him, and Ryn saw the thing's cruel tail swing around and stiffen in preparation again.

Forgoing his hope for better timing, Ryn flared his wings wide with a *snap* of catching air.

Luck—or perhaps the deity Declan and his forefather's called “the Mother”—must have been on his side this day, because it turned out he'd been in the middle of spinning right-side-up when the broad membranes caught. His wings jolted and strained in the upward rush, like catching the winds of a gale, and Ryn gave an unbidden grunt when the corded muscles of his back were wrenched by the jarring impact of cutting his momentum with a twisting jerk. The movement, though, slung the drey off of him as its own impetus continued to pull it down. With a keening scream that echoed in the ocean of emptiness, it plummeted away, and Ryn could only listen to it fall, hearing for a long few seconds the flapping sound of its ruined wings fighting uselessly to keep it afloat.

Then even that faded into the black, and Ryn was left alone, suspended in limbo.

At once he sagged, the pain of the hard-won fight pulling at him, dragging him down. The slow beat of his wings stuttered, and he dipped a dozen feet before he caught himself. Though he couldn't see it, he could feel blood streaming along his chest and legs, spilling particularly nastily from one back foot, below where the drey's tail had punched into his side. His neck, too, ached dreadfully, acutely so when he lifted his head to blink up into the black.

There, far, far above him, a distant point of light marked the cavern from which he'd fallen.

Hold on, Ryn said to no one in particular, pushing his wings to beat a little harder. Once. Twice. On the third he started to gain momentum, and soon he was ascending with gathering speed.

Hold on.

CHAPTER TWO

PLACEHOLDER TEXT.

• • • - *PLACEHOLDER TEXT*

Declan Idrys was not a man unaccustomed to danger. In his relatively short life of some twenty-five years, in fact, one could argue that he had come across most every danger a man of the blade was like to face. Between a near-decade spent under the firm rule of the mercenary guilds of Aletha—the great capitol city of Viridian—then three more years on the road as a hired sword for his more personal gain, not so long ago Declan would have been comfortable claiming he had seen it all. Pirates along the eastern coast, come off of Borel's Sea. Rebellions in the west, among the townships beneath the shadows of the Reaches, furthest from the reach of the King's justice. Beasts, murderers, highwaymen and common thieves, the latter of these not infrequently

being so bold as to cause trouble on both sides of the Viridian's southern border, shared with the Vyr'en, the sacred forest of the *er'enthyll* wood elves.

Unfortunately, more recently, Declan had discovered that his understanding of danger was not only limited, but severely lacking within the spectrum of what the world had to offer. He had, in the course of the last two months or so, had the misfortune of crossing steel with dead men, clashing with the chimeric nightmares of old that were the drey, and learned that his greatest companion was not simply *not* a horse, but in fact a dragon of a lineage akin to royalty among his kind.

And yet, despite the incredible reality of each of these facts, Declan couldn't recall a single time he'd felt closer to death than in the moment he sat on the damp stone of that cavern beneath the Mother's Tears, staring up the wet, glossy length of a black glass blade.

The sword was held to his throat with such unmoving precision, it might have been the decorative weapon gripped in the fist of a stone statue. It didn't so much as shiver, held with a steely confidence in the slim fingers of the woman before him, her figure clad in smoke-darkened armor of bound leather and light metal plating burnished gold around the edges. An open-faced helmet sat upon her head, from the top of which the long tail of a black plume hung loose down her back. Her skin was similarly only a few shades lighter than the shadows that had swallowed Ryn and the drey he'd been battling only a few moments before, and glistened with sweat.

But it was the woman's eyes that spoke most absolutely to Declan, the cool danger of her narrowed gaze—like fire made ice behind the white irises, teasing at red around their edges—that sent fear crawling up his spine.

Yl vas ab'ren, veht? the dark elf had asked of him. He did not speak her language—it was a curved, twisted dialect of a tongue in which he only knew a handful of words as it was—but the question was not lost on him all the same.

It was, after all, written in the threat of the blade at his throat.

What are you doing here, human?

Declan tried to speak, tried to answer, but found himself instead mouthing uselessly at the air. He was frozen, and not only by the paralyzing gaze of the woman before him and the wet gleam of her sword, still slick with the acidic blood that refused to catch on the strange, crystalline material from which it been forged. To his right he could hear Ester yr'Essel breathing only shallowly, thrown from Orsik's back as Declan had similarly been when the drey had caught them a massive swipe of its tail. Further to his left, he could barely make out Orsik himself wheezing and gasping, the warg largely unmoving on his side some dozen yards away where he'd been sent flying with a kick. Beyond the elf before him, the very drey responsible for the scene was lying in a crumpled heap against the slight incline of the cave's plateau, a half-dozen figures in the same armor as the woman standing motionless all around it, swords and spears held with silent confidence at their sides. Another of theirs lay dead, her head crushed to a pulpous mass in the twisted metal of what had been a helmet, the only casualty of the exchange that had downed the foul creature.

Yes. Declan had reason aplenty to have lost his tongue, he rather thought.

"Heys, veht?" The sword shivered a hair closer as its owner grew impatient with his silence, her stare boring into him with the same intensity of a drawn bow. *"Yl vas ab'ren?!"*

Again, Declan thought he could catch the gist of the demand.

Speak, human! What are you doing here?!

At last he fell back into himself, instinct working well to tear away the momentary shock as he realized there would likely be no third chance to answer. Declan opened his mouth with every intention of responding, but he stopped before he could get the words out.

How *was* he to answer? What was the likelihood the elves spoke the tongue of men? If Ryn and Bonner were right, then the *er'endehn*—the dark elves of Eserysh—had deliberately secluded themselves from the Viridian and its people more than six hundred years ago. Would they have bothered to keep up with a language so useless to them? With a people they had purposefully cut themselves off from?

In the end—and with the elf's white teeth starting to show as she bared them in final warning—Declan decided he at the very *least* had to make the attempt.

"We mean no harm," he said as steadily as he could manage with the sword at his throat, raising both hands in what he prayed to the Mother and her Graces above was a universally acknowledged sign of surrender. "We are not your enemy. Only travelers."

Unsurprisingly, the only response he got from the woman was a blank stare as she too, it would appear, realized the discrepancy in their situation. She spat something quietly, sounding like a curse, and Declan decided to take advantage of her uncertainty and try again a different way.

“*Se’aw*,” he said gently, hoping against hope that he had correctly recalled the word for “friend” as he lowered one hand to indicate he and Ester not far to his right. Slowly, he worked to get his legs underneath himself, aiming to stand. “*Se’aw... uh... Se’aw as—*”

CRACK!

The blow came so fast Declan thought he’d blinked and missed it. The woman had stepped forward and retracted her sword—originally so close to his throat and face—only to bring it around with the snapping precision of a snake, catching him a blow in the temple with the weapon’s pommel. Declan was knocked sideways to half-crumble to the stone again, too dazed even to think to bring his hand up to the side of his head. Through the stars in his vision he strangely could only appreciate that the elf hadn’t struck him with the flat of her blade.

A splash of drey blood in the face felt like the only thing that might possibly have made their situation any worse.

Through the ringing of his ears following the blow, Declan heard his aggressor lay into him with a furious tirade, and he guessed his mistake had likely been to try and stand. He shook his head, attempting to clear his vision, and he realized he was looking down on Ester’s bloody face, her eyes closed, her face wet and red from a nasty gash across her forehead. His heart skipped a beat for fear, but it brought him back to his senses.

Just as it reminded him that he and the half-elf were far from alone in this exchange.

CRUNCH! BOOM!

As though on cue, there was a spray of shattering rock, and a fissure appeared in the slick slope to Declan’s left, crumbling away from him while dust and wet stone disintegrated and streamed into the widening mouth. He heard the elf curse again, and looked around in time to blink through still blurry vision at the form of the woman dancing back. Shapes chased after her, pressing her further away, and it took Declan several seconds to comprehend the rigid outlines of a dozen stone spikes, longer and narrower than the ones that had briefly held the drey in place during their fight. They were cutting diagonally out of the fissure, like fangs of an underslung jaw, and stopped growing once the woman had been pressed a fair ways in retreat.

And there, approaching from beyond the elves with a slow care that Declan found almost frustrating in the desperateness of their situation, Bonner yr’Essel sat atop Eyera with both hands in the air, each of them glowing a verdant green.

The hood of the old mage’s robes was thrown back, revealing his clean-shaven head and the careful braiding of his beard. The light in his fingers—dancing and shimmering runic characters that faded in and out of existence like flames—reflected in the emerald of his eyes and off the white and grey fur of the warg between his legs. His face was calm, calculating almost, and Declan even thought he saw the man hush Eyera when the animal bared its teeth at the elves.

“*Mytos...*”

The word was a hiss. It slipped off the lips of the dark elf who’d held him at sword point, and despite her having her back to him now—facing the challenger who’d chased her away with his stone skewers—Declan could see the tension ripple through her body. There was fear, there, to be sure. A deep-seated, terrible fear.

But more than that, strangely, there was anger.

Abruptly the elf barked something at the rest of her retinue, and like shadows made liquid, the black forms surrounded Bonner and Eyera with a precision Declan had never imagined was possible. He’d spent more than a year as an officer in the Iron Wind, assessing and training the mercenary recruits under Cassandra Sert’s guiding influence. He’d even had the occasion to be graced with a glimpse of the surgical escort of Mathaleus al’Dyor and his queen, Syla.

Not a one among them—not among his own men, or the best of the royal couple’s—had shown so much as a fraction of the methodical exactness these dark elves moved with despite not exchanging a word between themselves.

For his part Bonner looked largely unconcerned. Indeed, after glancing with only mild interest at the entourage of black blades that encircled him, he dropped the spells he’d weaved with both hands, letting the green light fade to nothing before looking over the narrow chasm he’d formed to address Declan.

“You all right, boy?” Bonner half shouted, his voice echoing eerily in the vast hollow of the cavern. It reverberated in Declan’s ears and did nothing to chase away the lingering ring the dark elf’s blow had left him with.

“Aye,” Declan grunted back once he’d squinted away the ache. “Ester’s in bad shape, though. Losing blood. And Ryn... He fell...”

Though he kept his composure, the mage’s face shifted subtly at that, which was impressive in and of itself. Though they’d known each other only some weeks now, Declan would never be able to imagine Bonner as anything but supremely protective of his daughter, and knew he considered the dragon a great friend.

It seemed, for whatever reason, that the old man was being careful to give away as little as possible to the figures surrounding him.

“Do what you can for her, for now,” Bonner said as steadily as he could manage, his green eyes now shifting again to the elves who hadn’t yet made any move against him. “I’ll see to her once I’ve settled things here.”

Declan opened his mouth to protest, to tell the mage of the anger he’d seen in the bearing of the woman, but he shut it just as quickly again. For one thing, judging by the old man’s calculated countenance around the dark-skinned people, he suspected Bonner was already far more aware of the tensions than he was.

For another, the mage had already started speaking to the soldiers that encircled him in the fluent, twisting syllables of the elves.

For the first time there appeared the briefest pause in the confident bearing of the *er’endebn*. Declan even caught a few pairs of pale eyes exchanges looks of subtle surprise through the slats of their open helmets, but just the same, not a blade moved, not a spear or sword was lowered. The hesitation did not go unnoticed, too, because the women with her back towards him—this strange unit’s leader, Declan thought he could safely deduce—snapped something at the offending lessers, and all eyes locked on Bonner once again.

“Urrgh...”

The sound of groaning from his right made him start, and Declan cursed his distraction, looking around in time to catch a glimpse of Ester’s eyes fluttering open. He half-twisted to press himself near to her, feeling his left knee—which had been caught by the strike of the drey’s tail that had sent them all flying—straining and protesting at the abrupt motion. Ignoring the discomfort, he reached the half-elf just as she came further too.

“Aaaaah...” she moaned when she tried to lift her head, one hand coming up to her face as a wave of obvious pain paired with the motion. “What... What happened?”

“Don’t move,” Declan told her, his words instinctively quiet as Bonner continued to speak—and hopefully plead their case—to the dark elves. “We took a hit. The bastard sent us flying a good way.”

This did nothing to quell Ester’s apparent confusion. Pulling her hand down, she blinked several times in lack of understanding at the blood coating her fingers. “W-what? How...?” Her eyes went wide as understanding clicked into place, and Declan got a hand on one shoulder just in time to keep the woman from trying to sit bolt upright.

“Stay down. It’s alright. They downed the drey. We’re safe, at least for the moment.” Without thinking he took the cuff of his sleeve and start gently wiping the red from her face.

“They?” Ester repeated, still squinting at him as he tried to clean away the blood and grim, but ceasing her struggles. “Who’s ‘they?’”

Declan opened his mouth to answer, but before he could get the words out, Bonner’s voice was cut off to his left.

The unit leader had interrupted the mage, lifting one gleaming sword to point at him accusingly. Her words were slow, as though in consideration of what must have been Bonner’s imperfect speech, but all the same there was no warmth, there, no care or empathy. Indeed, the dark elf spoke with clean hostility, like one lacking all trust or faith in the person they addressed. Declan supposed he could understand the woman’s hesitation. If the *er’endebn* were even half as long-lived as the *er’enthyl*—their wood elf cousins far to the south—then their memories were likely to be measured in centuries, rather than years.

And the last time the dark elves of Eserysh had crossed blades with a wielder of magic could hardly have left them with any pleasant tales to tell their young...

At his side, Ester gave a hiss of surprise when she made out the elvish words, confusion crossing her face first, then realization. With difficulty she turned her head to peer in the direction of the conversation, but

Declan knew her view would be obstructed by the long spears of stone Bonner had summoned to their aid. Just the same, the half-elf seem to understand.

“*Er’endebn?*” she asked quietly of no one in particular.

Declan stopped working on her face, choosing instead to press his bloody sleeve over the still seeping gash across her forehead. “Can you understand them? I can’t make out a word in ten, if that.”

Slowly, Ester nodded. “They’re... accusing Father of trespass? I’m not sure... The language is different from the southern dialect. They want to know what our kind are doing the mountains...and where a mage learned to speak the elven tongue.”

Her brows furrowed, concerned as Bonner answered calmly, only to have *several* of the dark elves raise their voices in anger at his reply. When Ester translated, Declan understood their alarm.

“He’s told them our hope is to reach Ysenden. That we are fleeing the eye of the Queen.”

The elves’ agitation was kept brief by a short order from their leader. The woman with her back to them was no longer leveling a sword at Bonner, but the tension in her bearing had redoubled. When her subordinates were quiet again, she spoke, and for once Declan understood the simplicity of her statement without assistance.

“*Teyth’e, Sebranya.*”

Serhanya is dead.

There was a moment of quiet, the silence clinging to the emptiness. The absence of noise made Declan fear again for Ryn, but before he could look to the gaping hole at the base of the incline, Bonner spoke again.

This time, Ester translated his words directly.

“Whether dead or alive, it does not change the fact that the Queen is taking actions in the lands of men.”

There was more, but the rest of the mage’s statement was drowned out by further shouts from the elves. They appeared *truly* angered, now, baring white teeth at the old man, and beneath him Eyera bared fangs right back. Two of the *er’endebn*, tall figures of a matching height bearing mirrored black spears with curved, heavy blades, turned their weapons on the warg silently. They alone had maintained all composure throughout the conversation, and even as a growl built in Eyera’s throat, the pair stared her down impassively.

“*Ythel*”

The leader’s order for silence—for it could have been nothing else—cut across the noise so abruptly it might have been a knife. At once the others stilled and quieted, their answer to the command so abrupt it was almost mechanical. The elf woman, for her part, wasn’t actually looking at Bonner anymore. Her head had turned, her pale eyes now on the corpse of the drey, and Declan thought he could just make out the hint of concern in what little of her face he was able to make out from a side view of her helmet. He watched as she trailed the outline of the creature with her gaze, taking it in from the crowning horns of its ram’s head to the barbed tip of its segmented tale. Eventually her eyes lifted, and Declan suspected she was looking along the incline of the cavern to the other body laying facedown at the far end of the cave, near the shadows left untouched by the floating orbs of light Bonner was still holding suspended among the stalactites above their heads. *This* drey the dark elves had slain before Declan and the others had even known they were nearby, and despite its smaller stature, it did not change the fact that two of the creatures had been lurking within the mountains in such close proximity to each other.

Nor that a *third* had tumbled into the blackness of the abyss down the incline from them, dragging Ryn along with it.

It took the elf a long moment to come to her decision, not looking away from the corpses as she obviously contemplated Bonner’s words. At last she turned to take the mage in, and was silent for another few seconds, whatever choice she was making not an easy one to wrestle with.

Finally, she spoke again, and Declan felt Ester stiffen in alarm under his arm even as the ring of dark elves closed in as one of the old man and the warg.

“There will be no seizing of anyone, *thank you very much!*” Bonner shouted, the fingers of both his hands twisting into a rapid series of runes Declan didn’t have a prayer of following despite the time he’d been studying under the mage’s care. Quick as thought the spell formed, and the elves were only feet from him, blades aiming for Eyera on all sides, when Bonner thrust his arms out like a man sweeping aside a curtained door.

WHOOM!

The blast came as a wave of unseen energy erupting outward in all directions. It was visible as a distortion of the air for only the briefest moment, picking up dust and pebbles and moisture from the slick floor of the

cave, but it slammed into the offending elves with the same result they might have had had they been running full tilt at a solid wall. In combat the *er'endben* were silent, as silent as they'd been when fighting the drey, but discipline did nothing to keep their swords and spears in hands, nor their boots underneath them. As Bonner's magic caught them all together, they were knocked onto their backs or thrown away, tumbling outward from the mage like the falling petals of a black, blooming flower. Armor crashed against stone and weapons were sent scattering. Only the leader was far enough away so as to keep her feet, and even she was forced back two full steps, nearly impaling herself on the stone spikes that still flanked her. She kept her blades, however, and while her lessers scrambled to gather themselves, she regained her balance, then shot forward with breathtaking speed.

That was when the sound of wings reached Declan's ears.

There was a *whoosh* of churning air, and in the corner of his vision he saw a massive shadow rip upward from the emptiness beyond the ledge of the stone slab. Then his mind registered the details of the colossal black shape, and Declan choked out a cry of relief as Ryn made himself known, the black dragon tucking his wings and slamming down onto the stone with his front legs flanking Bonner and Eyera on either side. Though the warg bristled and whined in fear, she did not bolt as the mage brought a reassuring hand to the animal's neck. Ryn, for his part, bent his neck down, his body arching over the pair so that his head came flush to the ground, directly in the charging dark elf's path. With a breath of shock that betrayed her discipline, the woman did her best to stop herself, sliding dangerously across the slick rock.

She came to a halt not a foot from Ryn's exposed fangs, just in time for the dragon to open his maw...

... and *roar*.

In the enclosed confines of the cave, the sound of the primordial's defiance was a sundering force, vibrating through still air and hard stone. Declan had to bring his hand away from Ester's face to cover his ears, and lying beside him the half-elf did the same with a yell of pained surprise. The world itself felt like it was shaking, and as the roar slowly faded away there came the quiet pitter and clacking of dust and pebbles falling to the floor, shaken loose from the rough ceiling above them.

Caught more directly in the blast, the dark elf had dropped both her swords to bring her hands to either side of her helmet in a vain attempt to protect her ears, and all the same she was brought to her knees. By the time Declan could shake the ringing in his head enough to look around, the woman was shivering, kneeling before the dragon, who had reared up once more, apparently satisfied with the outcome of his entrance. All around them, every one of the other elves—including the pair of stoic spear-wielders—were standing slack-jawed, Ryn's bloody, twenty-foot-tall presence in their midst apparently more than enough to wipe away whatever self-control had been left to them after Bonner's announcement.

NOW—Ryn's voice was like a hammer on steel through everyone's head while he stared down on the half-crumpled dark elf before him—*if you are all done with this folly, shall we restrain ourselves and discuss this complication LIKE CIVILIZED PEOPLE?*

CHAPTER THREE

Whether it was shock, fear, or some other uncertainty, Declan didn't know, but for whatever reason the dark elves made no move against Ryn, nor any more towards Bonner and Eyerá. Two of them—the spear-wielders Declan was rather sure were brothers, if not twins—didn't move after several moments, but lifted their fingers from the haft of their weapons in a mirrored gesture of peace when the warg started to snarl at them. Reaching the woman still kneeling before the dragon, they each took her under one arm, hauling her to her feet and kicking her swords back towards the others with a tinkling clatter before retreating away from the trio.

Better, Ryn rumbled approvingly, narrowing his eyes at this group once the two men had made sure the woman was able to keep her feet. *Tell the rest to lower their blades as well, or I will personally ensure not a one of you make it back to Ysenden as anything more than ash on the wind. I am injured, I am tired, and I have arrived to find you attacking my companions without need or cause, as far as I am aware.* He snorted, lowering his head again to eye particularly at the leader, who seemed to be steadily composing herself again. *I had thought better of the er'endebn of Ysenden, truth be told.*

Ryn did indeed appear the worse for wear. He had returned to them bloodied and battered, with a number of injuries leaking wet even as he spoke. The dark scales of his neck glistened like black glass under a great hole that had been ripped from the flesh beneath his jaw, and Declan could make out his back right leg shaking under the strain of holding the dragon upright. A puncture wound had been punched into the side above the involved haunch, and crimson wept over the massive curves of Ryn's hips, knee, and clawed toes.

Still, even mangled as he was, the dark elves appeared hardly fool enough to think themselves any match for the dragon, who in weight alone likely outclassed any of the felled drey by five times at least.

The others turned inward, looking to their leader, and despite a continued tremor in her hands the dark elf stood taller, lifting her chin proudly. She began to answer, and it was as she spoke that Declan realized with a bit of start that the woman appeared to have understood the dragon perfectly. It wasn't all that surprising, of course. Ryn, after all, did not communicate via any spoken tongue, but rather through a connection of thought Declan had only recently heard the dragon and Bonner call "mind-speech." It was strange to consider, but with the mastery of cerebral magics Ryn's kind were best known for, it was hardly a daunting possibility that the language of dragons was a more universal communication than the simple vocalized words of man and elves.

And yet, despite this fascinating revelation, what intrigued Declan even more about the exchange happening between Ryn and the dark elf was the lack of fear, the absence of astonishment.

There had been shock in the first instances of Ryn's return, yes, but watching the pair now Declan had to assume it had been more surprise at the dragon's abrupt reappearance than any unexpected occurrence. Indeed, Declan couldn't bring himself to believe the elves had missed him when they'd first arrived, as Ryn had been having it out in the air over the chasm he'd then plummeted down into along with the drey.

And still they're calm... he thought in puzzlement, studying the faces of the other elves he could see, who were watching Ryn now with careful interest as opposed to any fright or suspicion.

"Seven hundred *bloody* years, and the bastards still haven't gotten over their grudge. Dragons are fine, are they? Oh of coourse they are... Never mind that the overblown reptile could belch them all into dust before I likely had a chance to summon up so much as a damn *spark*."

Declan blinked and looked around. Bonner, it transpired, had taken advantage of Ryn's preoccupation of the *er'endebn* to slip with Eyerá from between the dragon's front feet. He'd rounded the top of the narrow fissure that still separated Declan and Ester from the others, and was in the process of sliding off the warg's back, still muttering to himself. Landing with a *thump*, he looked around to pat Eyerá's shoulder even as the female half-turned away with a whine.

"Yes. Go see to your brother. I'll be there as soon as I've fixed up this pair."

With permission given, Eyerá bounded off at once, lopping towards Orsik's still-wheezing form. As she left, Bonner made his way closer to Declan and Ester, already eyeing his daughter critically.

Declan gave him a tired grin as the old man settled down before them to peer more carefully over Ester's wounded head. "Complain all you like. You seemed to have held your own just fine from where I stood."

Bonner snorted in answer, his bald head gleaming in the light of the orbs high above them. "I hope I've not fooled you into thinking me unconquerable, boy." The mage started poking and prodding at Ester's

forehead, making her wince and grunt in pain. “While I can certainly handle myself, the odds were *not* in my favor, had that little altercation escalated.”

Declan opened his mouth to argue, but paused. Indeed, he supposed he *did* have trouble imagining Bonner yr’Essel as anything other than untouchable. He’d seen the man’s magic throw off a drey, seen him summon the vitality of the earth with titanic efficiency. He’d witnessed Bonner pull both he *and* Ester from the edge of death and known him to have grown back mostly lost fingers and flesh claimed by the cruel claws of Sehranya’s wights.

And yet...

Declan glanced back to where Ryn was still listening to the dark elves plead their case, the injured dragon listening impassively and without looking away. The way they had moved... Declan had never seen anything like it, and could feel his heart picking up in pace as he rewound the fight in his head, thinking again of the way the *er’endebn* had danced around the drey, ducking and darting and striking with such precise intent, it had been like watching the choreographed ballets of one of Aletha’s royal companies. There had been no playing with the creature, no toying or teasing it as they cut away its life. Rather, it had merely been a battle carried out with calm confidence the likes of which Declan doubted he would ever know...

Yes... He supposed even *Bonner* could die, if cut down a thousand ways from a dozen swords that could bring even a *drey* to heel with near perfect ease...

“No fractures, no displacement,” the mage announced quietly, sounding a little relieved, and Declan looked back again in time to see him stick a finger into the blood that coated Ester’s forehead. Scrawling a trio of complicated runes into the wet red with the same ease Declan might have signed his name, Bonner leaned back with a sigh as the symbols flashed once, then seemed to vanish into the half-elf’s skin. “That’s done.” The mage’s green eyes turned to Declan. “Now you. Anything broken?”

Declan had to tear his attention from the wound on Ester’s head, which was stitching itself together as the woman’s face relaxed in relief. “You’re *sure* you can’t teach me that?” he asked of the old man, only half-joking.

Bonner managed a dry chuckle, taking it upon himself to move and grasp Declan’s left leg—which he’d been guarding fairly obviously—in both wizened hands. “Auramancy is not a discipline you have much talent for, boy,” he replied tactfully while Declan inhaled in pain when he knee protest the sudden manipulation of the limb.

“‘About as much talent as a rock,’ I think was the exact phrasing,” Ester joined in, managing a twisted smile through whatever ache remained as she started to sit up with only mild difficulty, clearly feeling much for the better.

“Yes-*eryb*-I recall, thanks,” Declan grunted in answer, having trouble appreciating the teasing in his vulnerable circumstances. Bonner was bending his leg without tenderness, clearly intent to do what he could and move on, now that he knew the pair of them were in no kind of significant danger.

“Nasty sprain,” the mage muttered to himself. “Torn inner ligaments. Not to worry, not to worry.” He let Declan knee settle, taking the joint into both hands. There was a building glow of green light, and at once Declan started to feel the pain of the insulted limb fade. Some fifteen seconds later, Bonner pressed himself to his feet with a huff, dusting his ever clean hands off as though by habit. “You two take it easy. You’ll be fine, but I’ll not have you pushing yourselves while the lesser healing sets in.” He looked Declan and Ester over one final time. “Any other injuries?”

When the pair of them shook their heads, he gave a brief nod of satisfaction, then turned on his heel and started towards where Eyer’s was licking at her brother’s quivering form.

“Where we’d be without your Father, the Mother only knows,” Declan breathed after a moment, testing his knee, then starting to climb to his feet when he found it lacked all but the mildest protest at the motion. Standing up, he grimaced as he found his leg less pleased with the sudden acceptance of his weight, but he turned to help Ester up just the same. Taking his hand, the woman allowed herself to be pulled him, blinking a little as what must have been some lightheadedness.

“Been saying the same since I was a girl,” she got out after the bout ended, looking up at him. “You’re filthy, by the way.”

Declan snorted. “You’re one to talk. Hold still.” He took her by the shoulder, using his cleaner sleeve to rub at the half-elf’s face again. Whatever magic Bonner had imbued into her skin had dried the blood Declan

hadn't managed to wipe away earlier, and so the remainder flaked off easily enough, leaving only a hint in her hair and around her ears that she would have to take care of later.

"Can you walk?" he asked once he was done. The dark elves had gone silent, which made Declan think Ryn was having a more private exchange with the leader of the unit. "I don't trust this ridge Bonner's left us on."

Ester pondered the bare four feet of ground between them and the magic-made chasm. Before answering, though, she turned, scouring the ground where they'd been huddled against the flat slope of the stone that led up into the larger cavern they'd left behind only some ten minutes prior. With a curse she pulled away from Declan and moved unsteadily a few yards along the base of the incline, bending down to grab a pair of items from the ground.

When she stood and turned around again, she held Declan's sword in one hand, and her bow in the other. Her splintered, useless bow.

"Damn," Declan echoed her disappointment. He was no archer, but even he could tell there would be no salvaging the weapon. It had cracked along the body, and one tip had snapped clean off, leaving the string dangling lamely.

"I doubt it matters," Ester tried to sound light-hearted, handing over his sword before reaching back to pull her quiver around herself and peering in. Sure enough, most of the arrow hafts were clearly snapped in two or more pieces, and the ripped fletching of those that had miraculously survived said they would be hardly good for any kind of straight flight.

"And Orsik was carrying the spares," Declan groaned, sheathing his blade on his hip after a quick inspection told him the steel had survived the tumble largely unblemished. "I'm sorry. If I'd been paying more attention..."

Ester looked sadly down at the damaged bow for a moment more. Then she shrugged, letting the weapon fall to the ground with a *clatter*, and started making her way to where Bonner was hunched over Orsik. As she passed Declan, she lifted a hand, almost reaching his face before hesitating, then patting him gently on the chest instead.

"Against that *thing*, I think we did the best we could." She let her fingers linger on his shirt for a moment as she indicated the fallen drey with a dip of her head. "And we're alive. All of us."

"Not without help," Declan grumbled, turning with her as Ester began walking again.

The half-elf was about to answer, but was interrupted when one leg partially gave out beneath her. Declan managed to catch her before she could fall, grunting as his own knee expressed displeasure at the abruptly added weight.

"Thanks," Ester breathed, standing herself up again. "I think that answers your earlier question about whether I can walk..."

Declan chuckled darkly, bending to bring one of her arms about his shoulders, then looping his own around her waist. She voiced no protest for once, and soon after they were limping together towards where Bonner was crouched between Orsik and Eyera, the former whining and wheezing with every breath, the latter pacing nervously at the mage's back.

"How is he?" Declan asked once they reached the odd trio, easing Ester down beside her father before hobbling around to the male's head. Orsik's eyes were closed, and blood was bubbling along the warg's lips with every breath, but one ear flicked up half-heartedly when Declan managed to kneel beside him and run a rough hand through the hair of the animal's neck.

"Not out of danger, unfortunately," Bonner said, clearly distracted. His hands were wide, fingers splayed as he ran them over Orsik's broad, upturned side. "More broken ribs than I care to count, and almost certainly a punctured lung. We'll be here a few hours, if I'm to see him on his feet again."

Do it. Commander ay'ahSel tells me their purpose in the mountains is completed. They are returning to their base camp, and will lead us out.

Ryn, it would seem, had completed his conversation with the dark elves. He was turning towards them, each fall of his clawed feet landing with a crunching shake that made the slab beneath them quiver ominously. Beyond him, the *er'endehn* had not moved from their gathered position, though the leader—ay'ahSel, if Declan guessed correctly—had been returned her swords, the black blades now hidden in plain, matching leather sheaths at her hips.

At his right Bonner scoffed without looking up from his charge. “Ryndean, I would kindly point out that without your timely intervention, I would likely be slung over the shoulder of one of their number and Eyera would be dead, most likely along with these two.” He waved one hand between Declan and Ester, the other working on a number of circles in the stone before Orsik’s weakly rising chest. “You can’t possibly think I’m heavily inclined to join them so easily, even if they give us an apology.”

Ryn, for his part, gave a grunt and started to shrink before their eyes. As the titanic presence of the dragon’s true nature contracted into the tall, lithe form of his *rb’eem*—his dragonling form—he answered.

You misunderstand, Bonner. There will be no “joining”. We are to be prisoners.

A true five seconds of silence followed this statement in which Declan and Ester could merely stare at Ryn, while Bonner’s astonishment was displayed in his freezing mid-crafting of the runic circle he was putting together.

“WHAT?”

All three of them made the exclamation in the same moment, Ester and Declan both even trying to leap to their feet, she failing and falling back down to sit by her father, he managing to do so only barely.

“Ryn, you can’t be serious?!” Declan demanded of his friend, gapping up at the gold-white eyes like he expected to make out some hint of a jest in their reflection. Of course he found nothing, and so his incredulity bloomed into true anger. “Bonner has the right of it. You weren’t here. You didn’t see. If he hadn’t intervened when he did, I’m fairly sure my head would be tumbling down into the dark right now.” He gestured in the general direction of the abyss down the incline from them to make his point.

It is a temporary measure only, Ryn assured them. I’ve explained our situation. They seem doubtful, but Commander ay’abSel is choosing to see us as something to be handled by her superiors. We are to be escorted to a nearby outpost, where she says someone will have a better sense of what to do with us.

“Aside from skewering us in our sleep, I hope?” Bonner asked dryly, having returned to his work.

Ryn gave him a sharp look. Despite the transformation, his wounds had remained—if in a lesser form—and he had one clawed hand pressed to the open puncture that now bled over his right hip. *I would remind you that this particular leg of our thus-far rather eventful journey was none other than your idea, Bonner.*

Bonner was silent at that, feigning focus as he pressed his magic into the finished circle of power. It flashed, then faded, and all around Orsik the stone began to stir and tremble.

“You don’t think they took you for your word a bit too quickly?” Ester asked calmly, clearly attempting to defuse the tension of the conversation. “It’s not a trap? Or something of the like?”

Ryn hesitated at that, and the pause was enough to tell Declan that the possibility had not been lost on the dragon.

I had considered the same, he confirmed a moment later, dipping a head in acknowledgment towards Ester as behind her Bonner’s stone ribs started to extend like claws out of the ground to encase Orsik. But their confidence in me seems... genuine? He made a face, and glanced over his shoulder at the dark elves, who had gathered about the single fallen among their number, apparently giving their final farewells. *I can’t place it. They did not fear me as they should have...*

“Did you ask after Arrackes?” Bonner spoke up from his place on the ground where he was now scrawling more runes into the growing arches of rock. Within them, Orsik began to still, his wheezing and snuffling lessening into slow, steadier breathing. “Perhaps they are more familiar with your kind than we could have hoped for...?”

Ryn considered again, then shook his head. *Perhaps, but I did not. I left how best to monitor the er’endein to his discretion, as I did with Shaldora and Tylvenar with their charges. If Arrackes has been in hiding all this time, I did not want to risk putting him in danger.*

Bonner gave an absent nod of ascent, not disagreeing. Declan, for his part, had momentary trouble imagining how a dragon would be hard to spot in a place like Ysenden—which sounded like the single central hub of an entire people—until he ventured a guess that this “Arrackes” had likely taken on less conspicuous form for the last centuries. Declan had known Ryn as nothing more than horse of peculiar gifts for the better part of twenty-five years, and therefore could imagine another of his kind standing silent guard over the dark elves as some sort of bird, perhaps, or domestic animal. He shivered, not liking the consideration of how lonely such an existence must have been over hundreds of years.

“Poor bastard must be a wreck,” he mumbled to himself, easing down to sit beside Orsik’s head again as Bonner’s magics began their long, slow work. Fortunately no one else appeared to hear him, so he settled on eyeing Ryn’s injuries while he started to pet the warg through the stone the mage was still drawing symbols into. “You’re practically in pieces, friend.”

Raz grunted like he was only again feeling the pain of his injuries, and the hand that wasn’t held to his side came up to dab with clawed fingers at his neck. *Evil thing didn’t make it an easy fight. Their imbued, I’ll stake my line on it.*

“I have a feeling that’s a reality we’ll have to accustom ourselves too,” Bonner said while he worked, and Declan saw the mage glance sideways to eye the dragon. “Will you hold up until I’m done with Orsik?”

Ryn nodded, wincing as the motion didn’t agree with the injury to his neck. *Likely. The bleeding is not so great in this form. He half turned to take in the body of the drey that wasn’t more than a handful of meters from where they lay. They’re a different sort of challenge altogether, like that. If I’m to have so much trouble with even one at every encounter, I shudder to think what sort of fight the lesser of my kind will face, if it ever comes to it.*

“Then let’s pray it doesn’t,” came Bonner’s low reply.

Ester, however, was looking between the two of them curiously. “Is this so rare? Were the drey of the war not imbued?”

Ryn grimaced like the question brought forth too many unpleasant memories. *Some were. A few, in the first encounters. They were the root cause of our initial decimation, at least before we learned to take them on in groups. Tyrannus and I could manage an imbued as a pair with relative ease, but for a beast to claim the exclusive attention of a single primordial, much less the both of us...*

Declan nodded along, understanding for once. For the greatest among the dragons to have been so involved in a single class of enemy during a war in which mages, monsters, and men both living and dead sought to tear them from the skies could only have been disastrous.

“If we assume each of the others is equal to the one you faced, then we have a problem, Ryndean.” Bonner was clearly listening to the conversation, but spoke without looking around from his work. “That would imply our enemy is stronger, this time around... *much* stronger.”

Ryn nodded gravely, but caught the questioning look both Declan and Ester were alternating between him and the old man.

During the war, one in fifty of the drey were so empowered, he explained as behind him the *er’endebrn* were rising from their vigil over their fallen comrade, the slain elf’s sword held in the leader’s hands with reverence. *Such magic is fiendishly complicated. Certainly beyond me, and likely beyond Bonner, though I prefer to assume that is merely for lack of study. The dragon glanced over at the mage, who offered only a noncommittal shrug that had Ryn continuing quickly. Imbuing is a weave that requires not only immense power, but the care and time to see it done to perfection. If each of the four we’ve faced has been so blessed by the Queen’s hand...*

“Then we need to assume she has been at work for a long, long time,” Declan finished for his friend with a groan, shutting his eyes in understanding as he heard Ester curse in elvish from where she was still seated beside her father.

Exactly, Ryn confirmed, looking around when the sound of leather boots over wet stone reached them. *For the time being, we should assume this fight will only get harder before it gets easier.*

Declan nodded, but said nothing more, choosing instead to join the dragon in watching the elves close the distance between them. The consideration was heavy in his chest—he’d stopped counting the number of times this battle with their intangible enemy had *already* nearly claimed any of their lives—but there was hope, too, in Ryn’s words.

So long as the primordial of the dragons had not given up on this shadowy war, Declan supposed he had no reason to himself.

The elves stopped some distance from them, fewer of their number than Declan might have expected eyeing Ryn’s new transformation with anything more than mild interest. They were more invested in the magics they could witness coming to fruition before them, pale gazes wide—and often suspicious—while they took in Bonner’s work.

“*Kay vryth, dregun?*” the leader of the unit asked of Ryn, not looking away from the stone ribs extending up and over Orsik’s massive body. She had removed her helmet, holding it by the lip in one hand while in the other she grasped the sword of her fallen subordinate, blade bare to the glimmering light. Her hair was bone-

white and long, plated into a flat braid not so different from Ester's style, and the tight hold of it revealed the slenderness of her pointed ears. She might have made a spitting image of the wood elves of the Vyr'ehn, were it not for the near-black of her skin.

It is a spell of healing, came Ryn's answer. Nothing to be distraught over. It will run its course in an hour or two, at which point we will be fit to move again as you desire.

Declan hadn't understood the question, and was grateful for the context the dragon's response provided. From the elves, on the other hand, there was an unhappy murmuring, though whether due to the magics or the length of their execution Declan couldn't deduce. One among them—the left of the spear-wielding duo he was almost *sure* were twins, now—even said something brief and firm.

Ryn snorted at the comment, narrowing his gold-white eyes at the offender. *Prisoners we may be, but do not press your luck. You and I both know it is in name alone, and I do not recommend leaning so heavily on your decorum in my presence.*

That silenced the man, and Declan could have sworn he saw the elf's brother hide the shadow of amusement on his face by turning his head and pretending to examine the body of the drey not far away.

Either to spare her officer further embarrassment or merely adhering to some strict protocol, the leader of the unit stepped forward smartly. With a sweep of her helmet she indicated Declan, Ester, and Bonner, as she spoke to Ryn, lifting the sword in her other hand as though in example. The dragon, for his part, rolled his eyes before looking around at them again.

Commander ay'abSel politely—he said the word with a note of sarcasm—*requests that we surrender all weapons we might have on our persons.*

The elf had clearly not missed his tone, because she added something terse that said in no unclear terms the dragon was pressing his luck with her. Ryn, of course, appeared as though he couldn't have cared less, and didn't so much as bother turning back to acknowledge that the woman had spoken to him before translating.

She has asked that I clarify that should her superiors deem us in no way a threat to the er'endehn, our possessions will be promptly returned with apologies.

"In so many words," Ester grunted from beside her father, clearly having understood the dark elf without any trouble. It made Declan realize Ryn was very likely turning the *er'endehn's* words for his sole benefit, and he felt simultaneously grateful and embarrassed by the prospect.

Then again, it didn't look like they were about to suffer a shortage of free time in the coming days, so maybe he could convince the yr'Essels to spare some of the journey on improving his handling of the tongue.

Declan. Your sword. Knife, too.

Ryn's private voice startled Declan, who momentarily fallen into considerations of the language difficulty. Raising a brow at the dragon in displeasure, he hand over his bastard sword before reaching down to pluck his long knife from his belt, where it had hung much more frequently now that he typically fought with a firestone in his off hand. Ryn accepted the blades, then handed them off to the dark elf leader, who again passed the weapons to one of her lessers at her back. Declan watched with growing resentment as the soldier took the steel in with an amused look, like a learned man might examine the stone tools of some long lost civilization. Beside him, one of his companions was doing much the same with Ester's saber, though this elf woman's mouth was downturned behind the opening in her helmet, all too clearly finding the weapon wanting.

"Done."

Bonner's tired announcement managed to drag Declan's attention from the irritation towards the elves, and he turned in time to see the old man stepping away from Orsik's healing cage and dropping his hand. He seemed exhausted—as he always did when completing any significant magic, but looked doggedly to Ryn. "It's not as meticulous as I'd like it to be, but it will do the trick in a couple hours. For now, that bleeding looks like it needs more attention."

The dragon didn't argue, nor voiced a word of protest when the mage approached to peer up at the underside of his jaw, then the hole over his right hip. Declan could hear Bonner muttering to himself, but clearly the damage was less involved, because after several second the man turned to look at him.

"Declan, water from Eyera's bag, if you would. I'll have to replenish his blood."

He didn't have to be told twice, but Declan's legs felt sluggish as he turned to do as instructed. His knee throbbed and almost gave in under the weight of his first step, and he grunted as he caught and steadied himself on one of the stone ribs of Orsik's cage. The healing magics thrummed pleasantly under his palm, but Declan

snatched as hand away as quickly as he could, afraid of interrupting the delicate cycle of the weave. The runes shifting in the rock continued their dance unperturbed, however, and he breathed a low sigh of relief before starting to move again, making for Eyera.

The female didn't so much as glance at Declan as he dug through her saddlebags for their waterskins, too intent on her brother to even growl in displeasure. With a bag in each hand, Declan turned away from the warg and limped to Bonner, handing the first of the pouches over. The old mage accepted the water with hardly a glance away from Ryn's neck, in turn shoving it against the dragon's chest so that his patient was forced to catch it with his one free hand.

"Drink," Bonner said simply. "It will make this job much easier."

Uncapping the bag, Ryn did as instructed, tilting it back to guzzle down the contents. After days of careful rationing, Declan had to suppress a jolt of alarm at seeing the liquid vanish so quickly before his eyes, particularly when the dragon drained the first of the skins and offered it as a trade for the full one. There was nothing for it, though, and—with the elves beyond them seeming unconcerned about the loss of provisions—Declan handed the second bag over with nothing more than a blink.

In minute or so later, Ryn stood before them much less rigidly, fingering the newer, less-ordered scales under his neck that marked where a jagged rending of flesh had stood only shortly before.

"Anything else?" Bonner asked. Despite standing tall before the dragon, he sounded exhausted. Declan couldn't blame him. Between the fight, the healing of Orsik in particular, and now the tending of Ryn's wounds, the mage had very likely expended more magic in a single go than Declan had witnessed since their very first encounter with the drey, back at the yr'Essel's woodland cottage hidden away in the heavy woods of Viridian's western forest.

Ryn shook his head, dropping his hands from his neck to eye at the elves over one shoulder. *Nothing time and some rest won't handle on their own*, he said, and Declan indeed hadn't missed the smaller scratches and cuts around his friend's snout, face, and shoulders. *The latter of which we could all use, if I had to guess.*

Indeed, the dragon too looked nearly ready to keel over, which was hardly unexpected. After weeks of intense study in the basic principle of the arcane, Declan understood better now the kind of toll transforming from a lesser form—like his *rh'eem*—was likely to take on the dragon.

Still... The idea of dropping their guard now, of all times...

"I know we're not likely to move for a couple of hours, but is it a good idea to sleep here?" he asked quietly, pointedly gazing past Ryn when the dragon and Bonner looked around at him, indicating the dark elves now standing some dozen yards away. The lot of them were apparently examining the remains of the drey, and discussing amongst themselves.

Ryn nodded slowly. *Abrasive they might be, but I don't sense we're in any danger of being "skewered in our sleep", as someone put it...* he gave the old man at his right a sidelong glance, which Bonner pointedly ignored. *If anything, there's the argument to be made that we're safer now than we were an hour ago.*

Not so convinced, Declan only shrugged. He'd had nothing but unpleasant interactions with pure-blooded elves in his own life. Those were the *er'enthyl*, sure, but thus far his experience with the *er'endebln* had borne with it no confidence that the dark elves harbored any less distrust or distaste for outsiders.

In the end, though, it was hardly his call to make with Bonner and Ryn both of the verge of falling asleep on their feet, and so it was with only moderate resignation that Declan joined the other two in returning to Ester and the warg, feeling naked without the familiar weight of his sword and knife pulling him down to the stone as he sat beside the woman. Ester had shifted closer to Orsik's head so she could run her hand over the rough grey-white fur of the sleeping beast's neck, but she looked around when Declan groaned against the twinging of his knee as he eased himself down.

"How's Ryn?" she asked gently. Her other hand was resting atop the crown of Eyera's head. The female, having curled about Ester, snuffled and whined quietly, dark eyes not leaving her brother's slumbering form.

"Fine. Tired." Declan finally managed to get comfortable, the damp stone under him having been carved out into pits and lines by what could only have been centuries of condensation and runoff. "I think he and your father are going to get some sleep while they wait for Orsik to heal."

Ester frowned at that, pausing in her stroking of the male. "Is that a good idea?"

"I asked the same thing. Apparently they're not worried, though." Declan tilted his head to indicated Orsik's other side, and Ester craned a little to look over the warg and his cage. Ryn, sure enough, was already on his

side—having not even bothered to change out of his dragonling’s form—while Bonner looked to have just finished drying a patch of ground for himself to do the same.

“Lucky bastards,” Ester muttered, sitting back again.

Declan gave her half a grin. “Sleep, if you want to. I’ll keep any eye out for trouble.”

The woman raised an eyebrow at him and cocked her head. “Declan Idrys, how in the name of *any* god do you expect me to sleep soundly in the presence of people who can do *that*—” she lifted one hand to point “—to a monster you, me, *and* my father together were having trouble taking down?”

Declan followed her finger and took her meaning to heart at once. In death the great form of the ram-headed drey was hardly less terrifying than it had been in life, and from the slow current of blood trailing down the incline of the stone Declan could just barely make out the subtle *hiss* of acid eating at the ground.

He swallowed and looked around at the dark elves even as he nodded in understanding of Ester’s fear, and unbidden his right hand lifted to the breast of his jacket.

Then his heart slipped into his stomach.

Oh no...

“What? What is it?”

His alarm—or sadness, rather—must have been plain on his face, because Ester was suddenly looking at him with grave concern.

“The firestone,” Declan hissed, forcing himself not to turn too abruptly as he looked around towards the fissure in the earth Bonner had rent into the earth to save them for the wrath of ay’ahSel. “I’ve lost the firestone your father gave me. When the drey hit us.”

Ester blinked at him, like she didn’t understand.

“... And? What of it?”

Declan frowned at her. “I’ve only been practicing for a few *weeks*, Ester. Without it *and* my sword? What am I?”

To his surprise, Ester gave him a lopsided smile.

Then, before he could ask her what was so amusing, she reached down and—from the scattered options offered to her by the destruction wrought in the wake of the drey’s attack—plucked a single, sharp pebble about the size of Declan’s thumb from the ground.

“Here.” She held up the rock, still grinning. “Found it.”

Declan frowned at her, not understanding even as he held his hand out to accept it. “What are you on about? This isn’t—”

Ester, though, cut him off.

“No, of course it isn’t the same one, Declan. But it doesn’t *need to be*. Those stones aren’t anything special. They come and go as my father needs them, and he certainly doesn’t carry them with him as he travels. It’s not the stone that matters, Declan.”

“It’s the magic.”

Declan was the one who finished for her, and he might have smacked his palm to his face had he not thought Ester was close enough to bursting with laughter already. He had seen Bonner do exactly that, hadn’t he? Thrown a firestone away like it was nothing once it was no longer needed? Several times, in fact.

And he had also seen the old mage make them anew.

Talking the pebble more firmly in hand, Declan closed his fingers about its jagged surface and focused. Though he didn’t know *exactly* the method by which he was supposed to go about it, the concept couldn’t be all that different from infusing the ground with energy, something he’d been doing ever since they’d fallen into these infernal tunnels. He was careful, *so* careful. He’d been struggling as it was to throttle his King’s blood whenever he and Bonner had been practicing without a vessel, and Declan had no interest in seeing what would happen if the stone took in so much magic it exploded in his palm. Calmly, he focused, pressing his will out of himself, down his arm and into the rock. He could feel the now familiar tingling, the prickling flow of energy up his arm...

“Oh.”

Ester’s quiet exclamation had Declan blinking and looking up. He didn’t even remember closing his eyes, and almost had to shut them again against the sudden blaze shimmering before him. Between his fingers, light

danced in undulating white-red rays, casting an orange glow so bright about them even Eyera's attention was finally stolen away from her brother.

"Woah..." Declan muttered, drawing his will back even as he opened his scarred hand. For a second or two more, the light was well and truly blinding, causing all of them to avert their eyes.

Then it faded, and Declan looked around again with a jolt of victory in his chest.

Though the stone was little bigger and sharper than the one Bonner had originally given him, it glowed with dim fire, like an ember left to the air too long. The light within it danced, shimmering outward across the jagged surface of the stone, and the warmth of it was palpable on his face even though it didn't burn his hands.

"I did it..."

The disbelief in his own voice had Declan giving a bark of laughter, which Ester joined him in. Reaching out, she held her slender hand briefly over the firestone, feeling the heat of it for herself.

Then she moved to close his fingers about it.

"Don't sound so surprised. If *I* had dragon's blood running through my veins, I damn well hope I could do a sight more than make a pebble glow."

Declan was too stunned, however, to run with her humor. He continued to stare at his hand. It no longer glowed—the excess of power he hadn't quite managed to hold back receding now as instinct for the pyromancy took over the balance of power—but it amazed him all the same. He'd created with his magic before, in a way. Heat. Fire. Even that outward eruption of force which had twice now saved him, first when they'd fallen into the mountain, then again against the drey.

But this was different...

Whereas those spells had flashed and flared out in an instant, here before him was the first true *weave* as Declan had imagined them. Tangible. Solid. Lasting. In his hand, incandescent and warm, was something real. Something *he* had made.

Taking in the jagged rock, Declan suspected he would not be losing *this* particular firestone as easily as he had the one Bonner had given him.

"Declan, put it away."

Ester's tone, a moment ago excited for him, was suddenly stiff. Declan snatched the stone closer to himself, slipping it into the breast pocket of his jacket instinctively. Needing no explanation as to the trigger of Ester's abrupt shift in character, he couldn't stop himself glancing over his shoulder. At once, though, he snapped his head about again, pretending to be interested in Orsik's now steady breathing.

He hadn't missed, though, the icy stare of ay'ahSel, the dark elf's white-red eyes having been in the process of sliding up from where he'd just been holding the magic to take him in with cold understanding.

CHAPTER FOUR

PLACEHOLDER TEXT.

• • • - *PLACEHOLDER TEXT*

The Endless Queen did not scream as her drey fell. She did not rant and rave. There was anger, yes—a seething, blistering anger that felt like a fire in the confines of her desiccated chest—but centuries of life did not come without the development of an inhuman patience.

Her rage would have to wait.

Two of her stitched beasts were dead. The third was only hardly less so, half-buried as it was in the rubble of shattered stalagmites at the bottom of the abyss it had so nearly dragged Ryndean down into. It was unfortunate, but ultimately it mattered little. Only the dragon's fire would be able to dispose of the bodies, and the Queen had little doubt the damned creature wouldn't be looking to take his true form again anytime soon.

No... No. She would get the bodies back. She would gift the drey with life again. She need only be patient.

Be patient, and think on how to try once more...

It was apparent to the Queen, now, that she had been a fool not to take care of the *er'endebln* when they had first broached the slopes of her secret kingdom. She'd thought little of the elves, and any action against them now might well complicate her coming plans for their people. Still, the decision had been to her loss in the end, because whatever level of alert the *er'endebln* might have been put on by the loss of their hunting party would hardly have been any meaningful price in exchange for the deaths of the party they had saved...

There was a harsh, grinding sound as the Queen clenched her timeworn teeth, her focus lingering on the youngest of the group, the one of King's blood. She'd not opened her eye on them since the four had been climbing the southern slopes of Karn's Line, having not missed Bonner Fehn's catching of the spellwork. Her hand was already too apparent in the bloody mess in the wake of the drey's failure, and she couldn't risk the old man being ready to track her the next time she spied on them. So, instead, she was left with only the extension of her senses, the broadened understanding of the world fed to her by the magics she'd long since woven into the mountains.

It was more than enough, though, to take note of the spark inside the young man. The flare of magic that had very slightly grown even in just the week since the group had entered her domain.

That was a fire should could not allow to thrive. It was bad enough the man—the *boy*, really—was shielded by the likes of his more powerful companions.

If he was allowed to harness his *own* power in addition...

Then the Accord may hold eternal, the Endless Queen thought with irritation.

There could be no such allowing that.

Making her decision, the Queen pulled her senses back, away from the cavern high above her and the strange ensemble of characters now resting there. When her focus was retracted, she sent it promptly out again.

This time, though, she sent it down.

Down, down into the earth, seeking, searching. She'd not forgot where the creature lay, had not forgot where she'd discovered it, long dead and half-rotten among the icicles and frozen lakes of the caves miles beneath any known world. Her kingdom was vast, however, and it took her some time to reach the thing, for her power to touch the pallid flesh of its time-ruined form.

Time—and death with it—though, meant as little to the Queen's subjects as it did to her.

"Rise," she whispered allowed to the emptiness of her chamber, feeling the command shiver along the tethers of her magic. For a long time, nothing happened.

And then the world began to shake.

CHAPTER FIVE

PLACEHOLDER TEXT.

• • • - *PLACEHOLDER TEXT*

In retrospect Declan suspected that Bonner had very deliberately made no attempt to rush the process of Orsik's healing, and he had no qualms with the delay. It was satisfying, for a time, to watch the irritation build in the posture of the dark elves after one hour turned into two, then three. They were masters of impassivity, their expressions largely blank as the promised time of departure came and went, but their impatience was given away by the grinding grips of black-armored hands about sword hilts and the stiffness of certain sets of shoulders.

At last, however, as their *fourth* hour spent resting beneath the distant illumination of Bonner's faint lights approached, it seemed the old mage felt the elves had suffered enough for their aggression.

"Up, you two."

Declan started, blinking awake as beside him he felt Ester come to in much the same sudden fashion. He cursed privately as he pushed himself up from Eyera's side, where the pair of them had apparently dozed off shoulder to shoulder despite their earlier reservations.

The fight had been more exhausting than he'd thought, Declan realized.

The first thing he noticed was once again the sad absence of his blades about his hip. Shoving that annoyance aside, however, he looked around to find Bonner standing over Orsik, the animal wide-eyed and breathing easily at long last.

“Oh *there* he is.” Ester’s delight as she clambered forward to greet the warg with a hand on his scarred snout was beaten only by Eyer’s happy keen of excitement, the female scrambling across the wet stone to get to her brother so quickly she buffeted Declan about the head with her tail as she passed. Snorting at the pair of them, Declan nonetheless pressed himself up, testing his knee only briefly before he, too, joined the celebration.

Bonner was in the middle of retracting the stone ribs—runes and all—back into the shelf beneath them. The moment he was able, Orsik kicked himself off his side and onto all fours, cracking several of the slender arms that hadn’t yet pulled away completely, and bounded free to join his sister in play.

“Hold on you bloody big furb—oh, never mind.”

Bonner, while still a bit the worse for wear, sounded much more like himself than he had after the fight. Indeed, he waved at the excitable beasts with a dismissive “bah” as he turned to Declan and Ester, a smile playing about his beard.

“It’s time we get moving,” he said unnecessarily. “We’ve left the *er’endeahn* stewing long enough, I suppose.”

Ester snorted. “Orsik would have managed fine with two hours in that weave, and you know it.”

Bonner shrugged, but it wasn’t he who answered the woman.

It’s fine. Let the elves squirm a little. I get the impression they have yet to understand the formality of our situation.

From the other side of what was left of the shattered stone cage that had housed the warg, Ryn, too, was getting to his feet, wincing only slightly as he rubbed at the new scar in his side.

“I’m not sure *I* have either,” Ester said, crossing her arms irritably. She, too, looked like she felt out of place without her curved saber at her side. “Prisoners ‘in name only’? Easy for you and father to say, Ryn. Declan and I are hardly more than a walking waste of provisions without our swords.”

“Not true. One of us has to be the pretty one,” Bonner answered his daughter, stretching and rolling his neck as he continued to watch Orsik and Eyer tussle about in celebration of the former’s recovery. Then he looked over his shoulder at Ester. “Not sure what purpose that leaves *you* with, though, dear.”

Declan and Ryn both managed to bark out a laugh at that. It felt good, even if it was at Ester’s expense. For a moment, things felt like they were sliding into place again, their usual banter returning despite the gravity of their circumstances.

Then reality returned with the cool snap of alien words.

“Ys vohn, dregun?”

Unable to stop himself, Declan whirled. Completely undetected by any of them, Commander ay’ahSel had approached to come to a stop not five feet from him, flanked on either side by the taller, spear-wielding twins.

Ryn looked to almost roll his eyes in annoyance.

Yes, commander. We are ready. Had you given us even half a minute to do so, we would have told you ourselves.

The dark elf seemed to have regained her composure in their respite, because she didn’t so much as blink at the dragon’s tone. Instead, she slipped immediately into a series of rapid-fire statements that Declan—even without understanding the language—could tell were commands.

At his right, Ester stiffed, still with her arms crossed over her chest.

“Not to speak?!” she demanded, like she were repeating something ay’ahSel had said. “How are we supposed to communicate, then?!”

“Ester, quiet.” Bonner’s order was firm, the sort of tone he only took when something serious was at hand. He hadn’t looked from the dark elf officer, either, and his faint smile had faded quickly into a frown.

Ester shut her mouth, though she still seethed, and Declan leaned over to whisper to her.

“Are we not supposed to speak? Why?”

The woman grit her teeth as ay’ahSel continued to speak as though there’d been no interruption. “*Apparently* sound carries in the tunnels, and they don’t want to attract trouble.”

“The tun—Wait. How long are we ‘not to speak’ for?”

Ester’s irritation deepened. “The entire time.”

Declan almost groaned at that, but a warning glance from Ryn had him holding his tongue. Still... They wouldn’t be allowed to speak? It was clear they wouldn’t be granted their weapons back until some superior

said—or *didn't* say—otherwise, and Declan would bet the Mother's name that Bonner wouldn't be allowed to train him in weaving for the duration of their trek.

They were about to spend days—if not longer—in the dark and cold, without distraction or conversation.

Shortly after, ay'ahSel quit her orders, and Bonner and Ryn only nodded together to affirm they understood. She didn't move after this assertion, however, and so it was with an *actual* roll of the eyes that the old mage and dragon turned to the other two.

You catch any of that? Ryn asked of the pair of them.

Declan shook his head even as Ester nodded.

"We're not to converse while in the tunnels," Bonner started to summarize for him, already moving to gather their things from where he'd stripped Orsik of his harness before casting the healing weaves. "Additionally, there's to be no light apart from what the moonwing lanterns provide. We're to share what provisions we have, and the elves will do the same. Between their causalities and extra rations, we shouldn't have much trouble reaching the exit."

"Moonwing lant—?" Declan began to ask, but Ester interrupted him.

"What about Orsik and Eyera? What are they to eat?"

Whatever we do, Ryn answered, moving to take the packs from Bonner as the old man grunted when he picked them up. *Apparently the Vyr'esh isn't far from the north slopes of the mountains. Once we're free of these caves, they'll be able to hunt for their own game again.*

That didn't seem to completely satisfy Ester, but—seeking to avoid any more potential arguments—Declan beat her to it, this time.

"The Vyr'esh?" It was less a question than a statement. Declan could guess on his own what the title had to mean, given the Vyr'en—the dense woodlands of the *er'endebn*—stood titanous and omnipresent far to the south, beyond Viridian.

Just the same, Bonner saw fit to translate for him.

"The northern forests." The mage whistled, calling Orsik and Eyera back to them. "You'll see. Or do you still think Eserysh nothing more than a wasteland of frost and snow, boy?"

Rather than address the jibe, Declan followed up with a more immediate curiosity.

"What in the Mother's name are 'moonwing lanterns'?"

Moonwing lanterns, it transpired, were a breathtaking contraption of the dark elves' making. About the size of a man's head, the main body of the device was a delicate cage of carved wood, each wall an intricate layer of curved spindles chiseled *just* close enough together the keep entrapped the contents of their enclosure. Within each cage, a single large moth around the size of Declan's hand batted slowly at the air, sometimes resting on the bottom of the carved wood, other times fluttering about or clinging to the sides or top. Each lantern was suspended from an iron loop at the end of a long, polished handle not unlike the haft of the spears some of the elves carried. Had that been *all* the contraptions were, though, Declan might have thought them nothing more than some odd display piece for an eccentric collector.

What made the lanterns fascinating, however, was that—rather than flickering with firelight—they *glowed*.

The light was faint, very nearly not enough for him to see by—at least not for the first few minutes they spent descending back into the tunnels. Still, it was present, emanating in a constant pale wash of white from thick lines along the wings of the moths in their cages. It helped, too, that there were three of the lanterns, divided equally along the line with Commander ay'ahSel at the head, leading the way with one in hand. The other two were—Declan was unsurprised to find—carried by the twins, one in the middle of their group, and one trailing at the back of the line, accompanied in silence by two of the remaining elves.

In silence...

Everything was in silence, now. Or nearly so. It was eerie, not speaking as they took the faint incline of the tunnels down, heading sometimes north, sometimes east or west. All was quite except for the echoing crunch of their descent, and—making it that much worse—Declan and his companions were the *only ones* producing any such noise.

While he'd always been made to feel like something of an oafish brute when compared to Ester's nimble movements, it was apparent from the moment they'd left behind the dead drey and the great cavern that even *her* elven grace was as nothing to the training and intuition of the their *er'endebn* "captors". The moment they were among the narrower tunnels of mountain caves, what was *truly* unsettling about their trek was the fact that Declan felt suddenly like the four of them were traveling in the company of ghosts, spirits of air and shadow. When the dark elves moved, it was without sound, without even a whisper of leather on leather, or of loose stone crunching underfoot. Every step was quick, and yet so, *so* cautious, avoiding the scattered pebbles and pools of water they occasional passed with steely precision. More than once, Declan found himself, Bonner, or Ryn on the receiving end of icy glares from one elf or another when they accidentally kicked a rock or caught a crack in the ground that had been hidden in the dark.

Even Ester did not go unscathed from this disapproval after she misjudged a patch of smooth stone and slipped over so slightly, her hiss of surprise jarring after some half-hour in the dark.

The silence of the elves was so impressive, in fact, that Declan soon found his irritation with the unit for their earlier assault fading away, to be replaced by nothing short of awe. The precision with which they moved with their weapons sheathed was no less astounding than had been their assault on the drey, sweeping out of the black like they had to cut down the beast in what couldn't have been more than ten seconds. Declan, despite himself, found that he could not stop from studying them, from trying to discern their secrets, the tells in their steps and motion.

He became so focused on his analysis, in fact, that when a voice cut across his thoughts he had to stifle a gasp of surprise.

All's well back there?

The astonishment came twice over then, and Declan blinked several time in confusion until Ester—walking at his left in front of where Orsik and Eyeria trailed them in single file—started much as he had. He'd long deduced that mind-speaking could only be performed either aloud to all present or to a single person individually, but it wasn't the fact that the one who'd reached out had clearly addressed him and the woman one after the other that shocked him.

It was that the voice in his head hadn't been *Ryn's*.

Looking ahead, it only took a few second for Declan to catch Bonner turning to glance over his shoulder at the two of them, half-grinning like he knew exactly what sort of confusion he had just caused them.

Oh, don't gape like that, the voice spoke up inside Declan's head, and this time he distinctly caught the old man's tenor in the tone. *You knew Ryn and I spoke like this already, didn't you.*

That he had, Declan had to admit to himself when Ester blinked beside him, clearly getting addressed in turn with what was likely the same treatment. He had witnessed the dragon and mage communicate in silence several time, in fact, in situations where speaking aloud wasn't an option or optimal. First in the hilltop clearing, where they'd been assaulted by wights, and then again as they'd ascended into the great storm of Sehranya's along the southern slopes of the Tears.

Still, this *was* the first time Bonner had addressed *him* in such a manner—and Ester too, judging by the look on her face—so Declan thought the scowl the pair of them mirrored in that moment was fairly deserved.

If Bonner noticed, he didn't make any indication of it, turning forward again.

We are merely discouraged from using our voices, not communicating as a whole. Ryn and I have been talking, and we thought this might be a perfect opportunity for you two to learn to mind-speak, wouldn't you say?

That had Declan's frown vanishing, and he felt the firestone in his breast pocket thrum with warmth to match his elevated heartbeat. A new magic. Something outside the realm of basic arcane law and pyromancy that had been the focus of his lessons these last weeks. Ryn had already implied that he should learn the art once, he recalled, but being presented with it now was more than just exciting. It was relieving. Maybe they *wouldn't* be so stuck in the dark and silence as he'd thought...

There was a dull grunt from his right, and he turned to Ester to find the woman looking dubious—and deliberately ignoring the scowl one of the *er'endebn* soldiers shot her at the sound. There was a brief pause of silence, and the woman's expression softened a little, making her look suddenly a little more hopeful.

Ester has doubts about her ability to master the craft, Bonner's voice returned, explaining, and Declan had to appreciate the man's effort. It had to be tedious to switch back and forth like this between the two of them. *She's afraid her lacking talent for weaving will be a hiccup.*

Will it? Declan thought automatically in reply, only to feel foolish a few seconds later when Bonner's voice didn't answer him.

Obviously there had to be a lot more involved with mind-speaking than the desire to have one's thoughts heard.

Click-click.

The sound, coming from behind Declan, Ester, and the warg like little more than the light patter of some falling dust, had an instantaneous effect on the *er'endehn*. In step with each other the elves halted abruptly, to a one looking back over their shoulders. In front of him, Declan saw Ryn and Bonner nearly run right into the backs of the soldiers who had been escorting them, the former's clawed feet stopping him in time while the latter barely suppressed a curse to his gods that echoed eerily in the silence.

Following the eyes of the elves, Declan and Ester, too, turned to look behind them. The sound, it seemed, had come from one of the spear-wielding brothers, because the elf had tucked the shaft of his moonwing lantern under one arm to free a hand, the fingers of which he was now twisting through a rapid pattern that Declan couldn't make out in the faint light. At first he thought the elf was crafting some sort of physical rune—not unlike the symbols Bonner sometimes formed with his own hands in combat—but the thrill of alarm this brought on was quick quelled when Declan realized some of the movements seemed to be indications, gestures and pointing.

Specifically gestures and pointing at him, Ester, and Bonner in particular.

Signing, he realized, impressed. *He is signing silently.*

Viridian had its own language for the deaf and hard of hearing, though those fluent in it were few and far between given only the wealthy could afford to send their children to schools or tutors who could teach such communication. Still, Declan had witnessed it not a few times in and around the bustling market streets of Aletha, and so, while the motions were alien to him, the act was not.

A voice, somewhere beneath a snarl and a whisper, spoke up in the strange language of the elves, and Declan found himself turning once more. Commander ay'ahSel had—in her fashion—looked to have stormed down the line until she stood before Ryn, where she appeared to very distinctly be berating a *dragon*. Once again Declan found himself astonished by the gall of the elves—the woman in particular—in Ryn's presence. Had any human been present to see the *rh'eem*—much less the dragon's *true* form—it was unlikely they would have been willing to be caught within miles of such a creature. And yet there ay'ahSel stood, as close to nose-to-nose with Ryn as their discrepancy in height would allow, hissing at him under her breath like he was truly just some insubordinate prisoner.

You said only that we could not speak, commander, the dragon seemed almost amused at the elf's obvious annoyance. *You have no instruction that we not communicate.*

The elf barked out an order, which had Ryn raising an eyebrow at her.

No. I don't think we will stop, thank you. We've agreed to your terms. Twice now, in fact. We've bowed to your fear that voices carry, but I should point out that you are the only one speaking aloud right now. Should my companions and I seek to talk via other means, then it is no different than your soldier's language. He waved a clawed hand at the tall elf man at the tail of the line.

The language of soldiers?

Declan frowned and looked around as the spear-wielding *er'endehn*, who in turn frowned right back at him. Like ay'ahSel, he had white-red eyes that glimmered dangerously from beneath his visor in the glow of the lantern tucked under his arm.

Was that what the signing had been? Some silent language to be shared between the soldiers of the *er'endehn* when silence was necessary? If so, not only was the fact that the dark elves possessed such a means impressive, but it also meant that—despite their silence—Declan, Ester, and Bonner had been caught in their communication.

Silent, deadly, and astoundingly observant, Declan thought, unable to fathom the rigor it must take to achieve such mastery of so many of the arts of war.

There was a final sharp word, and Declan looked around in time to see ay'ahSel stalking away from Ryn without a sound, leaving the dragon looking smug. The moment the commander was at the head of the column again they started moving, slipping once more deeper into the dark. After several seconds of silence more, Bonner's voice start up again.

It seems we will be allowed our communication, the mage said brightly, though he didn't turn around this time as he addressed Declan. Likely he wasn't keen on the observers behind them catching onto their one-sided discussion again, even if it was allowed. *Which means we will need to turn this into a conversation, rather than a lecture. First and foremost, I will need you both to review your knowledge of the Six Essentials of the Arcana, focusing most heavily and Essential Three, which, as you know—*"

Unable to help himself, Declan groaned, earning himself a curious look from Ester.

Then her father's attention must have switched to her, because she, too, made a face like she'd just been asked to admire the damp stone beneath their feet.