

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'enthyl* 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, golden 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 women before him and the wet gleam of her sword, still slick 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 which 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 ah’reht?!?*”

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 managed 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’av,*” 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’av... uh... Se’av 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 possible have made their situation any worse.

Through the ringing of his ears following the blow, Declan heard the 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, his 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 a 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 which 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 hiss. It slipped off the lips of the dark elf who’d held him and 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, 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 that 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 settle 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 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 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. Pull 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’enthyll*—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 voice 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 only 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 appear *truly* angered, now, baring white teeth at the old man, and beneath him Eyerá 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 Eyerá’s throat the pair stared her down impassively.

“*Ythe!*”

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 a 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 off 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 their 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 know, 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 an assuring 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 were shaking, and as the roar slowly faded away there came the more-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 own 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?*