

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It turned out to be excellent fortune that Ryn had found them, because the *er'endebrn* had—according to the dragon—drawn back from the foot of the slopes after the ay'ahSel brothers had returned not only absent their commander and the majority of their unit, but bearing reports of drey and more fearsome monster beneath the peaks. Declan had wondered briefly if the elves' recounting would be taken seriously, but it seemed the slaying of their soldiers was more pressing than the possibility of misinformation. The *er'endebrn* might be long-lived, but such longevity came at the price of the fertility.

To a people like the dark elves, the loss of more than a half dozen of their best—including the commanding officer, at least for a time—could not have in any way been taken lightly.

It was *into* the forest, therefore, that Ryn led them, still moving west but angling north as well. They rode for four or five hours—Declan filling his friend in on the full story of the last week all the while—steadily slipping deeper and deeper into the trees. As they did, Declan had the impression that the Vyr'ehn was *rising* around them, the pines and spruces and winter oaks growing even thicker, with the space between the frozen ground and their lowest branches rising proportionately to match. It was awesome sight to experience, looking around as they followed icy streams and managed the ups and down of the deeper woods, though day eventually gave the illusion of turning to night beneath the ever-thickening canopy of the elven woods. Declan, in the end, pulled out his firestone to see by, earning his closed hand not a few suspicion looks from ay'ahSel whenever Orsik came loping up to ride by or beside them. He didn't mind. He knew the elf had warmed to the magics over the last few day—literally *and* figuratively—and he doubted she would saw a word crosswise unless he accidentally set the underbrush on fire again.

And the view—the towering monoliths like titans looming out of the dark all around him—was worth a sidelong glance or two.

Nearly there.

Ryn's announcement—coming at the end of Declan's retelling of the fight they'd had with the wereyn not long before he'd found them—had Declan and ay'ahSel both looking up expectantly. Ahead through the gloom, a light could be made out, its brightness like shifting slashes through the trees as the dragon picked up the pace. Putting the firestone away at once, Declan waited with anticipation as the glow grew closer, broadening by the second. Within a minute the sun was reaching them again, and soon after the heavier *thuds* of Ryn's hooves over the hard ground turned to the crunching of icy snow once more as they road out of the tree line and onto the narrow shore of what Declan had to assume was a wide, frozen lake. A flat plain of white extended before them, untouched save for the occasional gust of the returned wind casting whirls and spirals of powder into the air now and again, and above them the grey clouds of the sky churned freely, silent but menacing.

It was across the lake, though, maybe a quarter mile away as the crow flew, that Declan's attention had fallen.

The camp was not an overly impressive sight, at least not from the distance they stood now. As Ryn turned south to lead Orsik around the loop of the shore that would eventually take them to the other side, Declan studied it with a mixture of excitement and apprehension. There were perhaps a hundred small, black tents in clean rows nearest the trees, with a trio of larger pavilions erected closer to the water. There was no barricade or palisade to speak of, but such defenses were hardly to be expected from a small forward base such as this was, if ay'ahSel and the others were to be believed. Truth be told, the only impressive thing about the place seemed to be a lack of smoke despite the numerous fires one could make out even from the other side of the lake, like the dark elves had gone through every effort to keep the sign of their presence in the Vyr'esh as small as possible. If that was the case, though, it seemed odd that they would set their encampment on an open shore, rather than deeper into the trees...

Unless...

"I guess I'd want to see my enemies coming too, if they were dropping from the sky..." Declan muttered.

What was that? Ryn asked of him without turning around, steady gate churning through the snow beneath them.

“Nothing,” Declan answered with a shrug. “It just seems like they took the warnings about the drey seriously, if they’re more keen on keeping an open line of sight on the clouds than shielding themselves from the elements.”

They hardly needed warning, Ryn told him. The drey were the reason the ay’abSels and their unit were in the mountains in the first place. Apparently one of them was sighted hunting over the woods, some weeks back. Unfortunately the foul things are more living than dead...

“Which means they need to eat,” Declan finished the dragon’s lingering suggestion with a shiver, imaging for a moment a drey beating its great, bat-like wings as it circled one of Viridian’s valley towns.

It didn’t make for a pleasant thought...

They were around the south end of the lake in five minutes, and it was another five before they were near enough for Declan to start making out the familiar sounds of soldiers at work. Even the *er’endebn*, it appeared, could not be silent when grouped in scores and hundreds, and he almost smiled at the nostalgia, recalling the countless times before that he and Ryn had ridden into the setting grounds of one mercenary company’s mission or another. Even clear of smoke the wind brought the smell of burning wood and cooking meat to them, and at his back Declan heard Orsik growl and bark in excitement, undoubtedly sniffing at the air with his ears up in anticipation as he ran.

Unfortunately for the warg’s stomach, they didn’t make it another twenty feet before there was a *thrum* of sound from their left—nearer the tree line—and a flash of black *thudded* into the snow only a few body lengths ahead, the latter half of a narrow shaft feathered in dark plumage not even quivering as it stuck out of the white.

An arrow.

Ryn came up short, and from behind Declan heard ay’ahSel shouting in elvish for Orsik to stop as well. The warg just managed to do so, slipping to a halt at their side with a snarl of annoyance, but no one was paying attention to the animal’s irritation at being held up from his next meal.

Declan, Ryn, and the commander had all turned to look up the steady slope of the shore, watching a pair of figures clad in familiar black-and-gold armor melt out of the woods as though they’d been a part of the shadows themselves.

The two dark elves were tall and slim, like the rest of their kind, but Declan only saw this because the heavy black cloaks hanging about their shoulders were opened and pushed back as the pair sighted along arrows drawn in their direction on the strings of twin bows. Though the ground was icy and broke beneath their booted feet, the soldiers never so much as glanced away from the four of them as they came sidelong down the way.

Fortunately for once, their proximity to the camp seemed to have brought back ay’ahSel’s martial flame, because she was snapping at the sentries before she could take more than three steps in their direction.

“Syt! Est evahn ay’abSel! Vebt yst dregun ys veros!”

Stop! Declan translated for himself privately, pleased to have caught most of the words. *I am Commander ay’abSel! The human and dragon are friends!*

The sentries froze in their tracks, but did not lower their weapons, nor exchanged so much as a sideline glance. After a moment the right-most shouted back what was clearly a question, too fast a too complicated to understand. The commander’s answer, in turn, was lost to Declan, as was the most following quick back and forth, though he did note ay’ahSel pointing at Ryn, and suspected she was explaining that he was indeed the dragon the sentries would doubtlessly have known had been in camp a few days prior. Another few tense moment passed in which the two soldiers spoke to each other sidelong, still never looking away or releasing the tension on their bows.

Then, though, the arrows were lowered at last, and when the rightmost of them addressed ay’ahSel again—waving for them to ride by—it seemed to be with a good deal more respect.

“That was intense,” Declan said aloud, turning as Ryn started moving again to sign in ay’ahSel’s direction.

All right? he asked hoping she would pick up what he meant.

The elf grimaced, and though her response was lost the resuming beat of hooves and crunch off clawed paws, the single word was familiar enough to him that he was able to read it on her lips even as Ryn answered his question as well.

Sebranya, the dragon’s voice filled the absence of the elf’s. *This is a people with a very old memory, Declan. Just because you walk—or ride, as the case would be—doesn’t mean you will be treated as a friend. Even if you bear the colors of the Ysendebn.*

Declan shivered again, adding a troop of undead soldiers in the regalia of Aletha to his already-frightening imagining of a town under attack by the drey.

“Fair enough,” he answered quietly.

It wasn't more than another minute before they were in clear sight of the camp, taking a small bend in the shore, and as they made their final approach Declan realized that—while simple as it might be—the grounds were a good deal more impressive than he'd been able to tell from across the lake. The tents—even the common foot soldiers'—were crisp and clean aside from a scattering of snow, their black-dyed cloth accented in burnished gold just like the *er'endehn's* armor. The fires were aligned in surgical rows that still allowed for easy movement along the shore, and closer to the frozen edge of the water the three greater pavilions formed a wide V to face the rest of the tents, two smaller one at a slight angle on either side of the largest. Above this middle structure a single banner was raised, black-and-gold like the rest of the camp, depicting the outline of a curved sword bisecting a strung bow, though whether this was the emblem of this forward company or the coat of Ysenden itself Declan couldn't guess.

He didn't have a moment to ask, either, because they were stopped a second time as they closed in on the camp, this time just beyond the edge of its outermost tents. The trio of soldiers that held them up this time were less aggressive, standing on the cleared sand where the snow had been melted or shoveled away to find the drier ground, but gloved hands were still on the pommels of sheathed swords as Declan and the others were addressed.

Once again ay'ahSel took the lead on the exchange, and this time Ryn was kind enough to act as translator.

They've asked who we are, and where we're coming from, the dragon said without looking around at Declan as the threesome of guards took them all in carefully. *The commander has informed them who she is, and explained our presence.*

Declan nodded along, having caught most of this early back and forth. At that moment, though, the middle sentry eye's fell on his, sliding from his face down his bloodied shirt and cloak, then finally settling on the sword hanging from his left hip.

“Ah *dammit*,” he cursed their carelessness even as he saw the elf's mouth draw back in the barest hint of anger, his white-red eyes widening even as the hand on his own sword tightened about its grip.

“*Veht ken sabres?!*” the sentry demanded of ay'ahSel, though he didn't look away from the borrowed blade. “*Sabres dys er'endehn?!*”

Declan didn't need a translator for this exclamation, but Ryn was already speaking.

He wants to know why you've got an elven blade, the dragon snorted. *And here I always found thought people so observant.*

His annoyance, however, seemed nothing compared to ay'ahSel's, who swung a leg off of Orsik to slide down into the snow before making a line straight for the sentry who'd spoken. The elf in question went stiff, apparently realized he'd just made a demand of a superior officer, and his posture—along with those of his two comrades—only tightened further once the commander had reached him and brought her face so close to his their helmets might have been touching. Whether she explained the state of her injury or merely reminded the foot soldier of his position, Declan didn't know, but a few seconds later the trio all nodded together, shouted something that must have been the equivalent of “Yes, ma'am!”, and stepped aside as one to allow them entry to the camp. Her job done, ay'ahSel looked over her shoulder at Declan and Ryn to give two quick signs before stepping into the line of the tents proper.

I don't underst— the dragon began to say, but Declan interrupted with a laugh as he threw a leg of his friend's back himself.

“Dismount. Follow,” he explained. “She's not one for too many words, usually. I've gotten used to it.”

Ryn grunted. *Apparently. Learning the language of soldiers. That's a rare honor. I don't imagine any man since Herst has had that privilege since Sebranya's fall.*

Declan, who'd moved to take one of the straps of Orsik's harness with the intent of leading the warg after ay'ahSel, frowned back around at the dragon.

“Herst? Why would Herst have learned soldiers' signs?”

Didn't I tell you? Ryn sounded genuinely surprised. *His sword master was a—*

Whatever the dragon said, though, was lost to Declan, because in that moment the sound of footsteps—quick and light despite the snow—reached him from behind. Instinctively he turned with a shout of alarm, hand going for the sword at his belt, but too late.

There was a blur of black-and-gold, a flash of silver, and something slammed into his chest to bear him heavily down to the ground with a *crunch* of sand and snow.