

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

PLACEHOLDER TEXT.

• • - PLACEHOLDER TEXT

Despite the—strangely—pleasant nature of her company, Ester was in no mood to smile. It had been some time, in fact, since she'd been of a mood to smile, which was rare for her. Even when her mother had been summoned back to the Vyr'en she'd managed to find some joy in her father's company. Even where her home had been burned and broken by the fight between Ryn and the drey that had set off their flight from Viridian, she had managed to laugh.

But, now—for *days*, now—her smile had failed her, and its absence had not gone unnoticed by even those most recent to take her company.

"You are a sad sort of character, are you not, yr'Essel?"

Ester flinched at the unexpected question, deliberately timed to match the moment she released the arrow that had been drawn to her cheek. Only muscle memory and years of constant practice allowed her to regain control at the very tip of her fingers, and the shot *thrummed* through the air in a blur of black. It struck true, *thudding* deep into the narrow red line painted in a jagged stripe between the scales of bark in a pine some 50 yards deeper into the forest, quivering to a standstill just under the elvish number "14" detailed in the same color above the marking.

Impractical as hauling proper targets into the field was, the dark elves had had to make due when it came to setting up a training range for the length of their outing.

Without looking over her shoulder, Ester drew another arrow from the quiver slung below her low back, knocking it as she scanned the woods for number "15". *"What makes you say that?"* she asked aloud.

"I think what my brother means to say—" a different, steadier voice answered her now *"—is that you have seemed quite low of spirit, these last days."*

Ester snorted. "And what would you know of my spirit?" she muttered in the common tongue of man as she found her mark, drew, and paused only a breath before releasing.

Though it had been nearly impossible to spot in the shadows of the woods, the arrow struck below the "15" as intended, the sound of its impact ringing briefly through the emptiness of the trees.

Satisfied with herself, Ester lowered the bow and half-turned, looking to her companions. *"Would you have me act differently? I seem to recall Colonel Syr'esh made it clear we are no longer your prisoners to order around."*

Aliek and Tesied ay'ahSel sat not far from one another among the great, gnarled roots of a pine whose girth might have matched that of a small house. With their own bows in hand they exchanged a brief glance of concern before Aliek—the more level-headed of the two, if any dark elf could be called more level-headed than another—answered carefully.

"It is true we are no longer your captors, yr'Essel, but this is irrelevant. We do not ask as those who escorted you from the mountains, but as those who would be your friends."

Ester smirked, looking away to unstring her bow, not replying until she started moving for a different dry root a bit separated from the two brothers.

"It is difficult to so quickly trust those who barely a fortnight before would have cut my head from my shoulders with hardly a blink if commanded to do so."

It wasn't entirely true, of course. If she was honest with herself, Ester rather enjoyed the company of the two brothers—twins, in fact, she had learned. They were warmer than the other *er'endehn* she'd come to know in the last few days, and were far quicker to smile and laugh, especially Tesied. Without intention on any of their parts, it seemed, the three of them had bonded slowly in the time it had taken them to escape the tunnels after the attack that had claimed the lives of most of the dark elf's comrades. After Kellek Syr'esh, the camp commander, had reluctantly granted she, Ryn, and her father temporary asylum after they'd revealed their knowledge of Sehranya's actions on the other side of the Tears, that bond had grown firmer.

After all, that last assault had stolen something else from all three of them...

“Who said anything about trust?” Tesied’s question halted Ester’s thoughts from slipping off into a dark place, and she looked up to find him watching her with the hint of a grin. *“One does not always have to trust to be friends, do they? I imagine you do not trust that that dragon of yours will not squash you in your sleep one day rolling over, and yet you are still very clearly friends.”*

Something pulled at the corner of Ester’s lip, a strange tension, and she only recognized it when Aliek pointed at her face with an exclamation of victory.

“Ha! You see! That was very nearly a smile! One sees the light in you, wood elf. You cannot hide it forever!”

“Shut up,” Ester muttered, automatically slipping into common again as she averted her eyes by pretending to check her bow for splintering. There was no need, of course. The brothers had seen her equipped with proper *er’endebn* equipment in apology for the loss of her weapons in the tunnels, and the curved black wood, detailed in gold, was flawless, as were the arrows in the quiver at her back.

There seemed to exist as much imperfection in the *creations* of the dark elves as there did in their coordination and combat.

“Cease your teasing, Tesied,” Aliek said with a sigh, pushing himself up off the tree to move towards the cleared circle of ground Ester had just been standing in. *“If she does not wish to speak, we should not press her to.”*

“Bah!” Tesied waved his brother’s words aside with a loose hand. *“She is interesting! How can I not desire to speak with her more? She has seen the world, Aliek! She has seen the lands of man, witnessed the grandness of their opulent cities and silver rivers and boats made of glass and—”*

“What in the gods above are you talking about?” Ester asked him with a snort.

Aliek turned to her with wide eyes. *“Have you not seen them? My, what a disappointment. And here I was hoping to hear tales of their capitol. I had heard it flies a mile above the world, floating on the power of old magics and—”*

“Who told you that?” Ester asked with dry amusement. *“I’ve not seen Aletha, but I can tell you it certainly doesn’t fly.”*

“Of course not.” It was Aliek who asked now, having strung his bow as he’d steadily spotted his targets from the darkness of the woods. *“It can hardly be anything so grand. Likely a primitive pile of rocks upon which their King sits holding his own flag.”*

“It most certainly isn’t,” Ester retorted, almost annoyed by the suggestion. Even largely separated from the realm as she and her father had been, Viridian *was* her own kingdom, which made her feel like she owed it at least a *little* loyalty. *“I’m told it’s a sight to take one’s breath away. Walls no man—or elf—could climb, with the turrets of the al’Dyor’s great palace rising above everything in the center. So many people live there that every quarter of Aletha could be its own city, and it stands in the center of a great, empty plain so broad that one can see it rising from the horizon as they—”*

Ester stopped then, though, taking note of the half-smile Tesied was trying to hide beneath his helmet, as well as the glint of amusement in Aliek’s eyes, turned towards her to listen even as he’d knocked an arrow to his bow. She realized, suddenly, how thoroughly she’d just been played, and with a groan she crossed her arms and legs and leaned back against the trunk of the pine to glower at the brothers.

“You’re asses. The both of you.”

The brothers laughed together at that.

And then Aliek whirled, drew, and released.

His hand was already pulling a second arrow from his quiver by the time the first struck the target labeled “1”. With a level of speed and precision Ester had only ever seen from her mother the elf planted a shaft in every line painted in a wide arc at varying distances before them. It not even seven seconds the final arrow was quivering beneath red number “10” that Ester hadn’t even bothered looking for, the echo of its impact ringing briefly off into the trees.

Though she’d witnessed this very feat a dozen times before, it was no less impressive to her now than it had been days ago.

It was another reason she didn’t find herself complaining about the twin’s lingering about her. Their companionship was certainly a buffer from isolation—her father spent most of his time in the pavilions in discussion with the camp commander and his officers, while Ryn had left not a few hours after they’d arrived to scour the slopes—but as intriguing as the ay’ahSel’s found Ester, she doubted it measured by half to the interest *she* had in *them*.

Aliek and Tesied, while perhaps not perfect examples of the stoney countenance most of the dark elves held themselves with, had nonetheless proven more than once that their brighter natures did not come at the

cost of discipline or ability. Though they both specialized in the spear, their skill with every manner of weapon the *er'endebrn* had at their disposal was uncanny. Ester had learned more than a thing or two from them in the art of archery, and that mostly just from watching. In the blade, too, she had been schooled, though those lessons had come in more direct fashion when the brothers had asked her if she'd had any desire to spare. The offer had been taken up greedily—*anything* to keep her thoughts out of darker places—and Ester had discovered that even Declan, despite being the most fearsome opponent she'd ever had the privilege for crossing blades with, indeed had a great deal left to learn compared to the fluid lethality of the ay'ahSels.

Declan...

Ester shook her head firmly, refusing to be dragged back to that place. She still held onto hope, still held onto the sliver of possibility. Her father consistently spoke of the man—and Orsik, too—as being nothing more than momentarily separated from their party, and Ryn's immediate departure and lack of return addressed his own equal conviction. It helped, to be sure, but as hard as she fought it Ester felt a little of that hope dimming with every passing day, and it was too easy to dwell on the "could"s of the situation. Could they have outrun the creature that had attacked them? Could they have found their way out? Could they have survived the cold and the grey of the forest?

No, Ester told herself firmly, forcing herself to focus on the moment, on the present. They're alive. He's alive. Crack.

The distant sound a breaking branch helped pull Ester from her slip, and she, Aliek, and Tesied all together looked around to peer north, further into the forest.

"Your beast approaches," Tesied said, betraying only the barest hint of tension in his voice. "*Perhaps it will prove a brighter companion.*"

"Doubtful." Aliek, too, spoke in a tone of slight-forced calm. "*I smell blood.*"

Ester would have liked to laugh at the pair's trepidation, but her humor betrayed her. What was more, she couldn't blame the two of them their nerves.

No matter who talented one was with a blade, it was a fool who did not fear a creature that could tear them in half.

Eyera made her appearance only a second later, pale form slipping from behind one tree to another, then out again as she made her way steadily through the woods in their direction. Sure enough, Ester too could taste iron on the air, and the dragging sounds that accompanied the warg's approach told her the female had had a successful hunt. Indeed, after a dip and climb in and out of a frozen stream bed and a quick jump over the thick body of a fallen branch, Eyera reached them. Without so much as a glance of acknowledgement at the two dark elves she crossed the cleared shooting space, passing so close to Aliek that the elf had to step back smartly to avoid getting about the struck about the legs by the limp limbs of the young buck the warg was dragging along by the neck.

"Good girl," Ester said as the female approached, reaching out a hand. "Looks like someone's eating well tonight."

Eyera made not a sound, though, even when Ester's fingers found the coarse hair atop her head. Her ears hung low too, and it was unenthusiastically that she circled into the nook of the roots by Ester's elbow, settling down to gnaw halfheartedly at the neck of the deer. Ester frowned, feeling the knot of sadness tighten in her chest at the sight of the somber warg.

It hurt to see, but it hurt too to be reminded of their mutual loss.

"*It still boggles the mind that you actually ride that thing, yr'Essel,*" Tesied spoke up eventually, watching Ester stroke Eyera's head as the female chewed. "*I've no idea what magics you've enthralled it with, but I admit to fascination.*"

"*My father is the mage, ay'ahSel,*" Ester corrected him quietly, speaking gently out of habit now that Eyera was by her side again. "*This is not spell craft. This is friendship.*"

"*I didn't know one could be friends with such a beast.*" Aliek this time, and Ester didn't miss the fact that—perhaps unconsciously—the *er'endebrn* had knocked another arrow to his string despite having finished his display of marksmanship. "*We usually just kill them, along with their masters.*"

Ester bit her lip, then nodded. "*Yes. I can understand that. I was of your mindset not so long ago, believe it or not. But these are animals, not monsters.*" She managed just the hint of a smile as she echoed her father's past words. "*And I've learned that the wereyn certainly think themselves masters, right up until the moment they become just another meal.*"

"*How encouraging,*" Tesied muttered dryly.

Ester gave a bark of a laugh. *“Is it so strange? There are those among the er’enthyl who ride bears into battle. I had imagined the er’endehn might have a similar bond with the land and its creatures.”*

“They what?!”

The question, echoed in the same moment by both brothers, was genuinely astonished this time, and Ester looked up to see the two staring at her with wide eyes. The blatantness of their surprise was an uncommon sight for dark elves—even from the likes of the ay’ahSels—and Ester couldn’t stop herself a single laugh.

“Oh yes. Great red bears they use to patrol the borders of their lands.”

“And you’ve seen this? In person?”

Ester shrugged and dodged the question. *“It’s hardly the strangest thing out there. After a fortnight in Ryn’s company I would have thought you two would appreciate that more than most.”*

The twins exchanged a glance, but did not comment on her suggestion. It was odd—had *always* been odd—how little concern they and the rest of the *er’endehn* had always seemed to bear in the dragon’s presence. There had been a little commotion when Ryn had taken to his true form just outside the camp line before leaping to the skies a few days prior, but even that had settled in short order and with a few shouts from the higher officers. Ester had been prying little by little, but either the elves were *so* oblivious to the oddity that was their lack of alarm that they took no notice of her attempts, or they were as wary of the subject as she was curious about it.

“What else is out there?” Tesied’s enthusiastic question cut across Ester’s thoughts, bringing her back to the conversation. *“Days now we’ve been your shadows, and we know no more of the world beyond the Line than we did as boys in academy. Is it true that man breeds like mice? And that they live scattered across the land? And what are the wood elves guarding their borders against? Humanity? Are you at war?”*

Ester blinked at the eager influx of questions, taken aback.

“I open up the smallest bit, and suddenly this is an interrogation?” she asked of the dark elf, offering a mocking scowl. *“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were tasked with working me for information for your superiors.”*

Tesied gave her a smile that was at once amused and a little frightening. *“Hardly. This is curiosity. If we had orders to extract information from you, there are much faster ways of doing. The fact that you still have all your fingers is a testament to that, is it not?”*

“Well you certainly know how to encourage one to be forthcoming,” Ester answered dryly even as Aliek rolled his eyes behind his brother’s back. *“But fine, since you’ve been so kind not to threaten my person... No one calls your mountains ‘Karn’s Line’ anymore. Not even the wood elves. I doubt there’s many left alive today who even know why it was named that in the first place.”*

Aliek’s face shifted at once from one of exasperation to interest. *“They don’t? Why in the spirits not?”*

“The war,” Ester answer simply. *“The assault against the Reaches by the traitors of the court of man. So much blood was shed that the ranges are known as ‘the Mother’s Tears’, now.”*

“The war...?” Aliek’s expression was as confused as Ester had ever seen any dark elf. *“But... Those aren’t even the right mountains...”*

“Seven hundred years is a long time for humanity,” Ester said with a sigh. *“Some stories seemed to have gotten... confused over time.”*

“More importantly: ‘the Mother’s Tears’? As in the goddess of man?” Tesied offered a bark of laughter. *“Well we can at least be sure of one thing: our instructors were on the mark when they spoke of mankind’s hubris.”*

“I doubt any lessons you could have partaken in could have come near impressing the degree of mankind’s hubris,” Ester agreed with a snort. *“It is painful to behold, sometimes.”*

“All of man?” Aliek asked.

“Essentially,” Ester answered with another shrug.

“Even your companion?”

Aliek’s follow-up question was careful, like he had been waiting for the right moment to broach the subject, and Ester stiffened. Like a battering ram had been taken to the walls she’d been fighting to built for herself she felt that barricade crack ever so slightly. She went quiet, not knowing how to respond, and her silence must have lingered just a moment too long because Aliek seemed he needed to clarify.

“The swordsman,” he said, as though Ester might not have know exactly who he was speaking of. *“Declan, I think his name wa—?”*

"I know what his name was," Ester cut the elf off too-quickly, unable to meet his or his brother's eyes all of a sudden as she found herself instead looking down at her own hand, still stroking a morose Eyera.

The silence came again, but this time it held, neither of the ay'ahSel pressing her. Eventually Ester steadied herself, but even after a calming breath her answer came out in half-a-stammer.

"N-no. Not Declan. He is different. Many of them are different, truth be told."

"But him especially?" Aliek pushed gently.

Ester opened her mouth, but couldn't find the words to answer with as a uncomfortable tightness built in her cheeks.

"I'd rather not speak of it, if it's all the same to you," she forced herself to get out after second.

"It's not all the same, yr'Essel." It was Tesied who answered, and for once the glimmer of amusement was gone from his dark features. He spoke calmly, carefully and without malice, like his brother, but just the same his words were as firm as cold iron. *"Your friend, Declan... I would remind you that he accompanies our sister, assuming that the two of them are still alive."*

"They are," Ester said at once, almost snapping. *"And I am well aware."*

"If you're so convinced that they are, then why is it clearly difficult to speak of?" Tesied kept on, leaning forward on his boot over his unstrung bow. *"You are not of our world, wood elf. That could not be plainer. Despite the journey we know you and your companions have taken to get here, you have not been braced for the loss of someone close to you. We—"* he gestured between himself and his brother *"—have. Since the day we were born. But we are not un-feeling. Our academies teach us to control our emotions, not strip them away. If Lysiat is dead, then her spirit is at peace, and we will see her again. But we hope it is otherwise."*

"We hope it is otherwise," Aliek echoed quietly, still standing with knocked bow in one hand.

"So... What?" Ester wasn't sure she followed. *"You want to know about Declan because... because you hope your sister is alive?"*

"We wish to know of Declan because if she is alive, then her back is being watched by someone we do not know if we can trust, and someone of a race you say yourself is often victim of its own vanity." Tesied grimaced slightly. *"Wish only to know enough to decide for ourselves if Lysiat has partner to seek us out with, or an anchor to weigh her down."*

Ester bristled at that, and Eyera must have sensed her sudden anger because the warg let off chewing to lift her great head and growl towards the brothers, teeth bared.

"Quiet, girl," Ester said more out of habit than any real intention to put the female at ease. Indeed, she didn't say anything else until Eyera quit showing her fangs, though even then the warg preferred to continue to watch the *er'endehn* rather than return to her gnawing.

"I feel I have failed to get a proper measure of you, Tesied ay'ahSel," Ester finally got out, forcing herself to keep her voice steady as she stared down the dark elf. *"I would have thought you a better judge of character. Did you forget there were three of your unit in that tunnel, yourself included? And yet Declan was the one who rushed in to save your sister. Is that not enough to deduce from?"*

It was Tesied's turn to stiffen, his expression shifting from briefly to pain before settling into the stony features of an *er'ehdehn* soldier's steadiness.

"I would have, and you know it," he said too-calmly. *"I tried, even, and was stopped."*

"You were stopped because rushing into that tunnel would have meant your life as well as Lysiat's," Aliek cut in, frowning at his brother, but Tesied waved his comment off without looking away from Ester.

"I do not blame you, Aliek. You always did keep a better head in such situations. I was merely correcting yr'Essel's accusation of cowardice."

At the words, Ester felt the flame of her anger sputter and die as quickly as it had come.

"I didn't intend to imply any such thing," she said quietly, feeling her shoulders sag a little. *"I am more than aware of the bravery of the er'endehn, ay'ahSel. Even yours specifically. I did not witness the felling of the drey, but the aftermath spoke for itself."* She shook her head slightly. *"I meant only to point out that Declan should have already proven himself to you. We know they survived that initial attack. He and your sister both. My father assured us of that much. But they only did so because of Declan's actions."*

Tesied watched her for a long moment more, posture still tense, eyes still dead.

Then, at last, he relaxed, offering her a wry smile as he reached up to scratch at the side of his neck uncomfortably.

"You've nothing to be sorry for, yr'Essel. I am as much out line as you are, I think. I did not mean to imply that your companion was anything less than he seems, and we—" he gestured between himself and Aliek "—owe him a debt in the best of circumstance, and his memory in the worse. I just meant that the line between courage and folly is a narrow one, and we wish to know if this Declan is a man above our understanding of his peers." Tesied, too, seemed to go a little limp then, gaze falling to the ground. "I apologize. Again, we are not un-feeling. It seems my concern for Lysiat has me a little more on edge than I would like to admit..."

Ester was about to acknowledge the apology when, abruptly, Aliek burst out laughing.

"Spirit, woman!" he half-shouted to the trees. "Tesied must have taken a fancy to you! I've not seen him apologize to anyone in a hundred years or so!"

"Aliek..." Tesied growled in warning, looking at his brother sidelong, but he was ignored as readily as the sound of the wind through the canopy above them.

"You should let him down easy, I think," Aliek continued, grinning now at Ester. *"Tell him you are taken, so he can start mending his broken heart. Do not be so cruel as to string him along."*

"Aliek!" Tesied said again, more firmly this time, all while Ester mouthed at the air in surprise.

"I-I am no man's!" she got out even eventually, feeling blood creep into her cheeks as she heard the squeak in her own voice. *"None have claim on me, and I would appreciate it if—"*

"I do not believe you," Aliek cut her off with another laugh, winking outright this time. *"Do not forget that we spent more than half a week in the company of your party before it was broken in two. You and that Declan were practically inseparable, about as much as this warg and her mate."* He gestured at Eysa—who had finally returned to her meal once she knew all was well—with a wave of his hand.

This particular comment was fortunate, because it brought Ester's control of the situation back at once. With a deadpan expression she stared at the chortling *er'endehn* for a full five seconds before speaking.

"You mean her brother, I assume? As the beast Declan roared into the tunnel is to her. I know not what you intend to imply by that, yr'ahSel, but I recommend you chose your next words very carefully lest I encourage Eysa to find out what the meat of a dark elf's ass tastes like."

Aliek's face froze mid-grin, and he might have been a statue abandoned in the middle of the woods for a moment. It was long enough for Tesied to turn the tables on his brother, jumping to his feet.

"Ha! Serves you right, bastard!"

At the words, Aliek shook off the momentary shock, though it wasn't his brother he addressed.

"yr'Essel, I am so sorry," the elf looked utterly mortified as he took a step towards Ester and put a hand on his heart. *"I swear on my life it was not my intention to imply that—"*

"That I would be inclined to lay with my brother, had I one?" Ester asked him sweetly, cocking her head. *"No? Because that's certainly what you seemed to be saying."*

"No. No. Not at all. I was jesting, I swear it. Had I known, I wouldn't have—"

Aliek paused as, at long last, Ester could no longer contain herself. She grinned, and the expression felt strange on her face, but hardly unwelcome, as was the laughter—the *true* laughter—that followed. All the while Aliek stood dumbfounded as Tesied snickered from where he stood, basking in his brother's discomfort.

"You are toying with me," Aliek groaned eventually, and as obvious an attempt as he was making to look annoyed, his relief was palpable. *"You mock me."*

"Only a little," Ester told him through laughs. *"I'm sorry. I felt the mood needed a change."*

"Days of trying to cheer her up, and all I had to do was make a fool of myself to get her to smile." Aliek shook his head, then gestured towards Eysa. *"I'll bet they aren't even siblings, are they? Your warg. They are mates, are they not?"*

"Quit while you're behind, ay'ahSel," Ester answered with a snort. *"They are siblings, and you are still an ass. It's just that you're less of an ass than you might have—"*

She stopped then, though, mouth hanging open in mid-sentence.

Under normal circumstances the ay'ahSel's might have found this abrupt pause alarming, but they too had straightened, ears still sharp under their helmets. All three of them stood tother in silence, then listening, straining. Ester wasn't sure, but she didn't think her mind had been playing tricks on her. A sound—a *voice*—had reached them through the trees, one that had stolen her breath away as soon as she heard it. It wasn't possible. It *wasn't!*

... Was it?

And then, at her feet, Eyera lifted her head from her prey again to sniff at the air, ears perked and listening for the first time in more than a week.

It was enough to convince Ester.

She was off the roots and vaulting over and through their gnarled fingers in a heartbeat, bow held at her side. The training area wasn't far from the camp for obvious reasons, and so it wasn't more than ten seconds of running before she felt the breeze of the open air again and she made out the flat white of the lake through the evergreens. She heard the others chasing quickly after her, Eyera barking in excitement while the ay'ahSels followed in silence, but the brothers were larger and a little slower than she, especially over the uneven terrain of the woods. She was out of the tree line and on the lake shore a dozen yards ahead of any of them, even the warg, and as her new leather boots crunched into the fresh snow she looked around, left and right.

There, a ways north of them like they'd passed by only shortly before, two pairs of familiar figures were in the process of being held up just outside the camp proper.

Ryn was the first that Ester's quick eyes recognized, his ink-black form—now the twisted shape of the horse that had acted as their pack animal for much of the trek through the norther woods of Viridian—in sharp contrast to the snow all about him. Orsik was beside him, looking a little thinner than when Ester had last seen the beast, while a feminine figure clad in black-and-gold that could only be Lysiat ay'ahSel rode confidently atop him.

And to the commander's left, straddling Ryn's back and taking in the impressive sight of the *er'endebn* camp, was a tall, broad man with long brown hair that fell to his shoulders, the skin of his ungloved hands scarred and splotched by familiar wounds.

"Declan," Ester breathed, not believing her eyes.

And then she was running again, taking off just before the twins and Eyera could catch up to her.

She practically *flew* over the clean snow, uncaring of the spray of powder, uncaring of the cold and wind that bit at her exposed face and ears. She ran, careening after the group, seeing ay'ahSel descend off of Orsik's back and approached the secondary sentries. The commander spoke briefly, and then was stepping by the parting guard line, turning to wave the others to follow.

Ester caught up just as Declan, too, dismounted.

She thought she heard a yell of alarm, but she didn't care. She didn't notice the burn in her cheeks or the tears in her eyes as she threw herself at his back, didn't notice him spinning in surprise or even her abandoning of her bow to the snow. She collided with the larger man at full speed, slamming into his chest with arms wide and bearing him down to the cold, sandy ground.

"*OOMPH!*" Declan exclaimed as the wind was knocked out of him, and Ester felt his strong hands grab her about the waist and arm as though ready to throw her off. "WHAT IN THE NAME OF—?!"

He stopped, though, his exclamation choking off as he must have recognized her. She didn't know of course, couldn't know.

She was too busy burying her face into his chest, squeezing herself against him through too-thin, bloodstained clothes, feeling the warmth of what had to have been his firestone against her cheek, stowed in its usual spot in the breast pocket of his coat.

"Ester...?" Declan asked softly.

Before Ester could answer, there was another cry of recognition and she made out two sets of feet churning by through the snowy sand on either side of her.

"*Lysiat!*" the ay'ahSel brothers shouted together, their sister's name carrying more emotion than every other word Ester had ever heard them speak combine. "*LYSLAT!*"

"*Aliek!*" came the excited answer. "*Tesied!*"

Then, though, all other sound was drowned out as—with a howl of joy that was almost wolf-like—Eyera and her brother must have found each other.

Even then, though, Ester didn't look up. Even when she heard the warg start to roughhouse and dance and bark in happiness. Even when the ay'ahSels started jabbering in such rapid elvish she doubted anyone—including themselves—could have understood what they were saying. Even when she heard the confused questions—half-shouted over the commotion—of the sentries.

All Ester did was shut her eyes tight, and hold onto the man beneath her even harder, refusing for a moment to let him go despite the cold sand she had dragged them down into.

“Ester...?” Declan eventually asked again, even more gently this time. At some point his own hands had moved to encircle her, pulling her equally close. When had that happened? “It’s alright. I’m alright.”

“You made it...” she mumbled into his chest, still refusing to look up, like she were afraid she might open her eyes and find him gone again. “You actually made it...”

Declan chuckled lightly. “Did you think I wasn’t going to?”

She laughed, the sound coming out as half a sob. “We had a bet running. The whole camp”

“Oh? And how did you make out?”

“I owe a lot of people money.”

Declan laughed out loud at that, the sound booming through her ears like a drum through his chest. It made Ester inexplicable happy, and at last she started to extricate herself from around the man, pulling her arms free from beneath him and to press herself off him and shake sand free of her sleeves.

“Are those tears for me?” Declan asked as he started to sit up. His eyes—the familiar dark blue of a deep ocean—were full of concern, which was ironic given the shape the man was in.

“The wind,” Ester answered quickly, deciding it was at the very least a half truth. “I hardly this *I’m* the one you should be worried about, though. God’s above, Declan... What happened to you?”

Aside from a ragged week’s beard and bags under his eyes from what must have been less sleep than he would have liked, Declan was also a bloody mess. Almost every inch of him looked to have been stained red, with some of the splatters clearly older than others, even turning to brown. Ester was pleased, too, that she hadn’t had the mind to notice the smell, because stench of iron was mixed with days of sweat and dirty clothes.

“Unpleasant, isn’t it?” Declan asked with a snort, looking down at himself even as he started to climb to his feet. “We apparently had a harder time than you lot making it through the woods, and there’s wasn’t much opportunity to wash or bathe.” He sniffed at a sleeve and grimaced, then offered her a hand. “Compared to you, I feel like a smell liked a sewer.”

“It’s not that bad,” Ester lied, accepting his assistance to stand herself. “A very nice sewer, I’d say.”

The nicest of sewers, yes.

The two of them started and turned together to find Ryn eyeing them in an amused sort of way. Now that they’d arrived, he returned to his dragonling’s form, and so had his arms crossed as he cocked his head.

I wasn’t going to say anything, but a bath is certainly in order, yes. For you and ay’ahSel both, Declan, and Orsik, if we can convince him. First, though, I imagine Bonner will want to know you’re alive, and we should probably let the camp’s higher ups know as well. They’ll want to get moving as soon as possible.

“Moving?” Declan asked, sounding surprised. “Already?”

Ryn made a face. *Without a doubt. Colonel Syr’esh would have seen us gone the days ago. Bonner and I were clear that that wasn’t an option of course, and I’m pretty sure Ester made such a racket about it that the officers were all afraid of being knifed in their sleep if they suggested departing before we found you again.*

“I wasn’t *that* obnoxious,” Ester grumbled, feeling her cheeks flush again and being glad for the excuse of the cold air. “And I certainly wasn’t the one threatening people. I seem to recall Father promising to turn every one of the higher ups in *trees* if they made any move to leave before we had time to go looking.”

“Well I can’t blame them, after the time we’ve had in these damn woods,” Declan grunted, patting sand off his pants as he looked around. The ay’ahSels were still huddled together as the clasped arms and shoulders, and Orsik and Eyera and bounded further down the shore to tussle. “I can’t believe you’re all untouched. It was like the Vyr’esh had put a bounty on our heads.”

The forest is plenty dangerous, but I don’t think its the threat of what lurks in the trees that have the er’endehn on edge. Ryn shook his head before he too, peered up the slope of the bank into the shadows of the woods. They weren’t pleased with their ay’ahSels report...

“Ah... So it’s the mountains that frighten them.” Declan nodded in understanding. “Or what’s *in* them, at least. Between the drey and the tunneler, I one certainly can’t blame them. And if their like is hidden among those passages, you know their master is too...”

Ester shivered. She had no desire, however, to let the unspoken name of the Endless Queen ruin Declan’s return, so she guided the conversation elsewhere.

“The tunneler?” she asked.

Declan nodded again. “The wurm. Or at least that’s how ay’ahSel described it. It was Sehranya’s beast. Nearly killed myself taking it down, and even then it was the Purpose that ended up burning it to ash.”

Ester's mouth went dry.

"The... the wurm? You don't mean..."

The think that attacked us in the tunnels on the day we got separated, yes. Ryn was almost smiling outright now. *It's quite a tale. You'll have to have him tell it to you later.*

Ester gaped at Declan, not seeing his sheepish grin, and it was several seconds before she found her voice.

"You KILLED that thing?!" she demanded, so loudly that the ay'ahSels nearby paused to all three looked around as one in alarm. "YOU?! HOW?!"

"It's... complicated," Declan answered hesitantly, suddenly looking like he wasn't sure he wanted to say anything more. "I don't think you'll be very happy with me if I tell you how..."

Ester scoffed, seeing where the conversation was going. "You probably did something stupid, didn't you? You probably charged the bloody thing all on your own, or set up some ambush that was just as likely to get *yourself* killed as it! Am I near the mark?!"

Closer than you can know, Ryn answered with a laugh as Declan expression started to hint at panic.

"Ester, I promise you, if there had been any other way—"

"Oh *bull*, Declan Idrys!" Ester seethed, stepping up to him so that they stood barely two inches from each other. "First you charge a drey like a madman, then you run into a collapsing tunnel, and now this?! I don't know if I'm more relieved you're alive or pissed you didn't get yourself killed so you could finally learn your lesson!"

"Well personally I would hope it's more the former, but I—"

"What's next, hmm?!" Ester cut him off sharply as she continued. "Going to hunt down the rest of the drey on your own?! Or maybe you'd like to go straight for the source, and just figure out where Sehranya is hiding so you can—?!"

"WHAT IS GOING ON OUT HERE?!"

The feminine voice, blazing with authority, rang out over Ester's tirade and the now-distant play of the wargs with such severity that Ester found herself shutting up at once. All together the nine of them—including the three sentries—whirled about to find a tall, wiry dark elf stepping out of the camp line with a purpose, her sharp eyes narrowed in irritation as she took in the scattered groups. Ester recognized her at once as one of the higher officers of the camp, but unfortunately had never caught the *er'endehn's* name or rank to explain what was happening.

Fortunately, the ay'ahSels had her covered.

"Lysiat has returned, Major!" Aliek shouted eagerly, pulling his sister to the forefront of their trio to show her off. "Look!"

The officer turned her scathing gaze on them, stare only softening a little when she took note of Lysiat ay'ahSel. Clearly she was unimpressed with Aliek's explanation of the situation, but Tesied came to the rescue before his brother was put at risk of being given a tongue lashing.

"Major y'Rehl," he stood to attention as he addressed the officer. *"Commander yr'ahSel has been recovered, as well as the human and second warg we informed the camp officers of in our report. Master Dragon has seen them returned, as he promised."*

The elf—y'Rehl apparently—glared between the two brothers for several seconds longer, clearly intent on making her displeasure known, and even when she finally started stepping towards the trio her scrutiny did not leave the twins until she was within a foot of them. Only then, at long last, did she turn her attention to Lysiat ay'ahSel, the fire finally waning from her gaze.

"It is good to have you back, commander," the major said with something that was almost a smile, extending an arm towards the shorter woman. *"You have been missed. Are you well?"*

"For the most part, yes ma'am," ay'ahSel grasped the offered arm firmly, nodding in confirmation. *"Took a blow to the head I'm yet recovering from. Loathe to admit it, but I wouldn't have made it without the human."*

The commander dipped her head and Ester and Declan's direction, then, and y'Rehl turned to follow her eye, taking the man in with measured steadiness.

"I see... Then it seems appreciations are in order. You!" She called out to Declan. *"Attend, if you would."*

There was a moment of awkward silence as Declan—who clearly knew only that he was being addressed, with no concept of the order itself—blinked blankly at the officer.

Lysiat ay'ahSel came to his rescue with a cough.

“Apologies, Major, but he does not speak the language of the er’endehn. He is a quick learner, however. Here.” She looked to Declan, and made a few quick gestures. Ester watched his face creased into a bit of a confused frown, but then he was stepping away from her, moving towards the group.

“Wait.” Ester followed him at once, catching his arm to hold him up. “You understood that?”

“She wants to me join them,” Declan told her with a nod. “Well, technically she said ‘collapse on me’, but I get the gist.”

Ester thought her eyebrows might have been reaching for the sky, and Ryn chuckled from her left.

You’ve had an even busier week than you let on, haven’t you?

Declan made a face. “You’ve got no idea.” Then he looked at Ester. “Not like I learned the tongue in a few days, though. Can you help me?”

Ester, realizing her mouth was hanging open, shut it with a *click* before nodding. As he stepped away again it still took her a moment to gather herself, shaking her head a little even as she followed. The worm, the woods, and now finding out that he’d been learning the silent language of the *er’endehn* soldiers?

Suddenly the improvements Ester had seen in her archery felt wanting compared to what she realized she might have asked the ay’ahSel brothers to teach her...

y’Rehl watched the approach carefully, almost like she was looking for any sudden movement, and though her arms were now crossed over her chest Ester didn’t miss her eyes slipping more than once to the dark elf sword still hanging from Declan’s hip. By the time they reached the foursome, in fact, the major was frowning ever so slightly, though it appeared her priorities in the moment weren’t to demand as to why a *human* bore the blade of the *er’ebndehn*.

“I assume you will act as translator, wood elf?” y’Rehl asked finally, not looking away from Declan.

“Yes, ma’am,” Ester answered deliberately. Though she was no dark elf—much less a conscript of the army—she thought it better safe than sorry when addressing one of the camp’s upper echelon.

The major nodded once. *“Good.”*

Then she spoke to Declan directly.

“I’m made to understand you do not speak the language, and yet it’s apparent you’ve made due. You have the thanks of the er’endehn, human. I would know your name.”

There was a pause as Ester turned the words for Declan, and he nodded as she finished.

“Declan Idrys, ma’am. And the commander certainly deserves less credit than me. We’re hardly masters at it, but we’ve learned to communicate as needed. Only reasoned we survived.”

“Is it?” The major sounded dubious. *“For days in the dark, then more in the Vyr’esb? And with a borrowed blade? I may not be familiar with the tunnels beneath Karn’s Line, Declan Idrys, but I am older than most in this camp, and can say for certain that no two soldiers of the er’endehn could survive long in these woods on their own. What’s more, I do not believe you to be of a caliber with the swordsmen of my kind...”*

Ester grit her teeth at this. *“That’s hardly nec—”*

“Translate, wood elf,” the major cut her off almost casually, still not looking at her. *“It is Idrys I address. Not you.”*

All the same, Ester hesitated, hardly willing to be bullied into speaking.

Then a heavy, dark presence stepped up behind her shoulder.

Translate, Ryn echoed gently, and the tenor of his voice made Ester feel like he was speaking only to her. *I suspect she has a point to make.*

“Well maybe she can make it without being a bitch?” Ester asked him under her breath, but she did as she was told.

Declan smirked once he understood. “It’s true I’m hardly a match for any soldier of the *er’endehn*. The commander has proven that twice over, and that was *after* it had already been made clear by the rest of her unit as well.” He acknowledged Aliek and Tesied with a dip of his head. “We were not, however, without advantages. Orsik, was with us.” He gestured back towards the two warg who were still happily bouncing and tumbling through the snow further down the lake shore behind them.

y’Rehl looked mildly amused once Ester translated. *“You expect me to believe that the beast is the secret to your survival? I am not a fool, human. You had best not treat me as one.”*

Declan raised both hands apologetically. “That was certainly not what I was implying, and I am aware of what you are getting at, ma’am. However, if you want to see the other tricks I have up my sleeve—” he put a

hand over the pocket Ester knew his firestone was hidden in “—it might be best to do that elsewhere.” He glanced pointedly towards the trio of dark elf sentries who still stood to one side of the conversation, perfect statues but yet very clearly listening to every word that was being said. “Perhaps somewhere more *private*?”

The major stared at Declan for a moment. She did not chew on her cheek or fidget in any other sense as one might notice, but Ester could tell just the same that she was turning his words over, considering them.

At last, she looked over her shoulder at Lysiat ay’ahSel.

“You would vouch for him, Commander?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the woman answered even before Ester to start telling Declan what the major was saying. *“I may not have been clear: this man has saved my life three times that I can count without thinking about it. Likely more. I would gladly vouch for him.”*

“Us as well, ma’am,” Aliek offered up, earning himself a seething glare for both his siblings. For her part, though, y’Rehl ignored him, looking instead to Ryn.

“And you, Master Dragon? Would you vouch for him as w—?”

I would swear on my own life that Declan is a man to be trusted and respected, Major, the dragon answered before the officer could get the question out completely. *I have known him longer than anyone in this world, without exception. You will not find a more stalwart example of mankind, whatever reservations you might have.*

The major nodded, but there was the very faintest hint of a smirk on the corner of her lips that told Ester y’Rehl very likely didn’t think being the most “stalwart example” of humanity was anything to be impressed about. Just the same, after a second or so more studying Declan, she lifted two fingers and made a following gesture.

“All of you, with me. I will take you to the Colonel. He sits with the mage as we speak.” The smirk turned into the faintest sign of distaste at the mention of Ester’s father. *“He will likely have more questions.”*

What of our beasts? Ryn asked evenly, clearly pretending as well not to have noticed anything amiss about the command.

“Unless they can speak for themselves, leave them be. I trust they won’t get up to much trouble on their—”

Declan. Ester. Call them, would you? I imagine Bonner will want to communicate with Orsik at some point at the very least.

Smiling to herself at the flash of surprise that snuck across the major’s otherwise hard features, Ester did as she was told, calling Eyera back to her as Declan did the same for Orsik. The warg came bounding up the shore at once, still half-playing even as they ran. Once they were all together—every *er’endebn* eyeing the animals nervously except for Lysiat ay’ahSel—y’Rehl made a sound of resignation before turning and moving into the tents at a swift pace, obviously expecting them to follow her.

In a narrow line, they all did, stepping after the officer into the heart of the dark elf encampment.