

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“He is our greatest ally, and therefore our greatest hope. Any of you who do not see that are either fools, or so blinded by your prejudice that you have allowed your ego to outweigh your duty to this city...”

- - Ciriak as’ahRen, Lord Commander of Ysenden,
 - to the High Chancellor’s council,
 - c. 800p.f.

Ciriak as’ahRen was in the middle of overseeing the afternoon drills for the Chancellor’s Guard when the runner arrived, darting through the pairs and groups of sparing soldiers with the guile bred and trained into the armed messengers of the *er’endebn*. The elf’s footsteps made hardly a sound over the polished floor of the training chamber, and he reached Ciriak so quickly that his shadow barely had time to flicker in the torchlight of the room before he was whispering in the Lord Commander’s ear.

Ciriak listened intently, then nodded and dismissed the runner again with a word. The messenger was gone in a flash, exiting the chamber again before the Lord Commander had even located his second in the throng.

“Mysat. Our guests have arrived. Take over. Work them hard.”

The petite elf he’d been addressing—dressed in the white-and-gold armor of the elite guard like the rest of the fighting soldiers all around them—disengaged from her own bout against two opponents at once to give him a brief bow of acknowledgment. The chain of command settled, Ciriak swept from the room after the runner as Mysat began shouting orders at once. Ordinarily the Lord Commander might well have chuckled to himself at the image of the diminutive Major berating the proud soldiers of the High Chancellor’s personal retinue, but now was not the time for amusement.

Despite what he’d been told, despite his absolute trust in the information he’d been imparted with not a quarter hour before by the Chancellor directly, Ciriak had to see for himself if his master had spoken true.

With quick, firm steps he strode down the dark halls of Ysenden’s upper levels, ignoring the subservient bows of the elves he crossed paths with. Even the few children he saw as he moved dipped their heads and stepped out of his way, and with a cleared path the Lord Commander was out of the tunnels inside of a minute, stepping into the light of the city proper with a sullen breath of relief as he paused just long enough to look up.

Despite the miserable weather of the day, he’d spent too long within the heavy walls of the city to be satisfied with anything less than the cleaner air of the middle sanctum.

Still a great ways above him, encircled by the pinnacle portions of the mountain that had long since been deemed to dangerous to dig into, the mouth of Ysenden opened up to a grey, somber sky. From the distance he stood below, Ciriak might have thought it was raining, except he knew that the temperature beyond the slopes of the city would have allowed for nothing short of snow, sleet, and hail at this time of year.

Not that it mattered inside the walls, of course...

Turning right, Ciriak didn’t have to walk more than a dozen yards before reaching the closest of the hundred ornately-decorated gondolas that lined the sloping surface of the inner cavern, the grinding sound of their chains and pulleys a constant thrum in the background of the bustle of city noise. Approaching the enclosed platform, he nodded to the gondola attendant, who politely cleared the few others waiting to descend with a word, not a one among them complaining when they saw who it was that was claiming the elevator. Stepping aboard, Ciriak didn’t have to wait long for the attendant to pull a bright white-and-gold banner from

the breast pocket of his black jacket, holding it over the side to indicate priority of descent to the directors who would be standing far, far below them. Sure enough, not a handful of seconds later they were dropping, the two otherwise alone on the platform, gaining speed as the pulley laborers undoubtedly strained at double-pace while other workers from the gondolas closest to Ciriak's rushed over to assist.

Despite the hurried descent, it was nearly two minutes before the Lord Commander reached the bottom of the city, during which time he took in Ysenden with a sort of tired fondness while his mind worked in a blur. The walls of the inner sanctum looked like they'd been carved into a hundred circular floors atop one another—tunnels leading from there into the markets, residential areas, and military quarters of the city like a maze further within the stone—but in reality it was all a single, spiraling floor that ascended at such a slow angle one could hardly notice the incline without dropping something perfectly round on the ground. The gondolas were staggered every fifty feet or so, the great beams that supported them colored alternating patterns of red, green, yellow, and blue to indicate if they stopped every single, fifth, tenth, or twenty-fifth floor. As a result, the city was constantly in motion, even in the depths of any night, with the angled rise and fall of the elevators only adding to the churning through of the one hundred and fifty thousand residents of Ysenden.

The air warmed, too, as they descended. The heights of the city within the mountain would have been enough for a variation in temperature regardless, Ciriak was sure, but the scholars of the *er'endebn* spoke too of the ancient heat that rose from the bottom of the sanctum, a subdued power that was the dormant remnants of a much more fearsome force a long, long time ago. Regardless, the warmth was enough that whatever precipitation managed to enter through the mouth of the mountain above them very rarely reached the floor of the middle cavern, offering a mesmerizing experience of attempting to track hail trails before they vanished into nothing three-fourths of the way to the bottom. Again, however, Ciriak had no mind to take in the sight, his focus still on his disbelief.

Was it possible? Was it *really* possible?

"*We've arrived, Lord Commander,*" the attendant said quietly, offering Ciriak yet another bow in the second before the gondola touched down in the carefully excavated pocket carved out of the stone floor that allowed the platform to rest flush with the ground. Stepping off with a brief thanks, the Lord Commander nodded his appreciation to the dozen bare-armed elves breathing heavily around the massive circular wench only partially hidden in the alcove behind the elevator. The moment he was clear of it, there was a shout, and the platform immediately began to rise once more. He paid it no mind.

He paid none of it any mind.

The brilliance of the great floor of Ysenden's middle sanctum held no fascination for him in that moment. Not the smoothed stone he walked across—polished naturally over millennia by more footsteps than one could comprehend—nor the trees of the carefully crafted *yr'el*—the indoor woodland that was both a park for the city residents and a training area for the elven soldiers—that took up the near quarter-mile diameter in its very center. The steam of the hot springs rising from the great mouths of the eastern wall of the cavern failed to catch his eye, too, as did the brightness of the "bottom market", the bazaar lit by a hundred torches so that visitors could browse the bright wares and foodstuffs on display there at any hour of the day.

No. All Ciriak cared about was the southern face of the sanctum and the great rend through the otherwise-solid breadth of the stone that was Ysenden's one and only entrance.

Was it *really* possible...?

The jagged tunnel through the base of the small mountain was longer than Declan had anticipated, and it was more than a minute's walk along the rough-hewn passage that he started to feel an unwelcome weight in his stomach. Despite the light of the torches carefully ensconced every dozen feet or so in a staggered pattern

on either jagged wall, the ceiling above them was high enough to be hidden in shadow, and the smooth stone under their feet was damp with condensation. Before long, Declan found himself back in the tunnels beneath the Mother's Tears, and his left hand went to his sword automatically as he listened to the thrumming of more than a hundred booted feet echoing back at him.

He wasn't the only one to be suffering from bad memories, either.

There was a light pressure at his elbow, and he glanced down to find that Ester had dropped back to walk beside him, her eyes partially hidden behind a short sheet of her sliver-gold hair that had come loose of her usual plaiting. She didn't look at him as they moved, nor spoke a word, but the tightness with which she held onto his arm with one hand was enough to tell him she, too, was not a fan of the dim space. Her touch was comforting, as always, and Declan felt a little better as he looked around, taking in his other friends.

If Ryn and Bonner were in any sort of discomfort, neither of them showed any signs of it. The dragon was looking ahead and walking like being surrounded by a hundred dark elves while entering their mountain home was the most normal of circumstances in the world, while Bonner was muttering to himself and stroking his beard with one hand while he looked up into the darkness, peering at the walls and stone in obvious study. Orsik and Eyera, on the other hand, were less pleased with their situation, and Declan couldn't bring himself to hush the warg as they growled in displeasure at the damp air. Further ahead, the ay'ahSels, too, were actually displaying a similar measure of unease, their usual guile and confidence replaced unanimously by tense shoulders while all three stared rigidly ahead, like they didn't want to look around and be reminded of a place they would rather forget.

Fortunately, forgetting became easy not long after a brighter light indicated they were nearing the end of the tunnel, some three or four minutes after they'd entered the mountain.

"Gods above..." Ester hissed, her grip tightening on Declan's arm as her awe was echoed by her father's similar words when they finally stepped out onto dry, polished stone.

Declan, for his part, had no words to express his own astonishment.

They had emerged into what might technically have been called a "cavern", except the term could hardly constitute the vast, open space of the place. It felt like the massive chamber could have held the entirety of Aletha, if the city's quarters were stacked one on top of the other. Almost as impressive, though, was the expansive floor of the place, a grey-black ring of solid, well-trodden stone perhaps two hundred feet in width, which encircled nothing less than a small, bright forest of verdant moss and evergreens not much smaller than those of the Vyr'esh. Declan could make out people coming and going from beneath these trees, some looking like they were returning from a casual stroll, others in a hurry like they'd cut through the forest to make for some place or another on the far side of the ring.

"Declan." Ester tugged at his arm to pull his attention from the inexplicable "indoor" woodlands, pointing when he tore his eyes from the greenery. Not far to their immediate right, a slight incline in the great floor before them had been carved into a subtle upward angle, forming a wide ramp on and off of which dozens more people were coming and going every few seconds. Many among these unarmored dark elves gaped, often looking back to stare even as they climbed, but Declan hardly noticed them and their—for once—colorful clothes as his eyes instead followed the trailing line of the ramp as it looped around the massive wall of the chamber, forming what he realized was a single spiraling floor that wrapped an innumerable times around the cavern as it climbed upwards. What was more, these rising rings were hardly the only way to ascend the interior of the mountain, it seemed, because what had to have been no less than a hundred narrow structures of carved, bound timber and chains claimed the sides of the narrowing floors, colored in a pattern and completed by moving platforms that were rising and dropping at various speeds everywhere Declan looked. These apparatuses reminded Declan of the man-powered "elevators" he'd heard the al'Dyors had had built in the tallest reaches of their palace, except those of Ysenden reached almost to the very top of the volcano rather than a measly dozen-story tower. The stone of the cavern continued to rise beyond for a ways more, unblemished by whatever tools had been used to carve into the lower parts of the wall, and at the very top of

the space a vast, roughly-circular opening allowed for a not-insignificant view of a boiling grey sky high, high above.

For some reason, in that moment, all Declan could think about was how beautiful the place must have looked in the full sun of a bright spring day.

“Unbelievable,” he finally managed to get out, so quietly he was pretty sure only Ester heard, because the woman gripped his arm just a little tighter as though to silently state her agreement.

“Well... I suppose we know now why Sehranya failed to take the city...”

Bonner’s words had Declan and Ester both finally looking down from the incredible sight. The mage, for his part, was looking around with wide eyes while Ryn nodded on his left.

Agreed. Erraven sounds like it was a walled city. If we assume the rest of the elven strongholds were the same, it becomes understandable why they were so easily overrun while Ysenden held firm.

“She didn’t have the drey until her attack on the Reaches, right?” Declan decided joining the conversation was the only way he was likely to keep himself from staring around with his mouthing hanging up. Even as he talked, he couldn’t stop from lifting his eyes to take in the heights of the city again. “There would have been no flying down *into* this place, when she attacked.”

“Small wonder she ended up making for the Vigil’s war,” Ester added, gazing around again herself. “What sort of fool would be willing to break their forces against a stronghold like this?”

“One who can raise those forces again with little more than a wave of her hand, Esteria,” Bonner said, though he sounded less like a lecturing father and more like a worn old man as he spoke. “Don’t forget that it took the Queen two years to get fed up with trying to break these walls. Had she had the patience, her eventual victory was not an impossibility.”

“HALYEN, YS!”

The sudden shout had all of them except Ryn jumping in surprise, with even Orsik and Eyera’s ears coming up as they lifted their broad heads to see what was going on. General Syr’esh, it seemed, had been the one to make the announcement, and Declan only had to wonder as to what was going on for a moment as every elf around them—from the freshly-polished city guard to the exhausted and injured soldiers of the advance brigade to the general and colonel themselves—stood at rigid attention.

“What’s going on?” Ester asked, brow furrowed as she frowned and stood on her tiptoes, trying to see around Ryn and her father’s backs.

Declan, though, reached around and took her by the arms, pressing her down gently. He, unlike her, was tall enough to see over the heads of everyone but Ryn, and he knew what had drawn the attention of the *er’endebn*. Even at a glance, too, he understood why the soldiers had all snapped to, and—for the first time since encountering the dark elves of Yseresh—he feared what might happen if they broke that decorum.

Though the city was bustling with life around them, only a single figure among the scattered crowds was moving towards their retinue with any deliberate intent. What was more, the way the throng parted around this elf would have been enough to tell Declan he was important, but the way he carried himself—the way he *moved*—was vastly more intimidating. He was a tall, broad figure, if not as broad as the Syr’eshs, and his black armor—not even hinting at any lining of gold or other color—was a bit heavier than most of the plating Declan had thus far seen from the elves. Despite this, he might have been wearing silks given the ease at which he carried himself, head up and shoulders back, the paired swords—one over his shoulder and the other at his hip—sitting more like extensions of his person than common weaponry. Declan wasn’t sure why, but even having seen Lysiat ay’ahSel in her prime, even having seen the twins with their fearsome skill and even the common soldiers stand against the terror of the wights, he got the distinct impression that *this* person could have faced off against any three of the finest blades that stood around him and come out on top.

Declan. If I'm not mistaken, that is the Lord Commander of the elves. The highest-ranking officer in the er'endehn military. Tread lightly.

Declan didn't even blink as Ryn's low words reached him, and was unsurprised to feel Ester flinch slightly as the dragon spoke to her privately, too. There was no doubt Bonner had been informed as well, because after a second the mage stood a little straighter and cleared his throat quietly, clearly readying himself for an important exchange.

The Lord Commander—who Declan saw sported a cropped beard streaked with white as he neared—reached them in no time as the residents of the city continued to part around him like fish giving deference to a shark. His white-red eyes—sharp despite his obvious age even for an elf—flicked over all of them in his final steps, for once pausing only as long on Ryn as they did on any of the others. Declan was among the last to be scrutinized, and when their gazes met an odd sensation clenched at his chest. It took him a moment to place the feeling—particularly after the Lord Commander looked away to address Colonel Syr'esh and his father—but when he did he couldn't help his face from twisting in confusion.

What he had felt was... recognition?

"I... think I know him..." Declan said quietly, not believing the words even as they came out of his mouth.

From in front of him, Ryn looked briefly over his shoulder to fix him with a curious eye, Ester doing the same from his side. She'd let go of his arm at some point, and was standing as tall as she could in an obvious attempt to show the same respect as the soldiers around them.

"What are you talking about?" she asked him sidelong, and he could imagine her trying to speak without moving her lips.

"I don't know," Declan answered under his breath. "I just... I recognize him."

Before Ester could voice any further disbelief, Bonner spoke up.

"I'm not surprised." He sounded—if not shaken—at least a little taken aback. For a man of the mage's ability and stoicism, it was disconcerting. "I know him as well. It's not you that recognizes him, boy. It's Herst."

Declan understood in a flash, feeling his mouth form an "oh" of comprehension as the flash of memory came back to him. A palace courtyard. The glint the steel. A scarred elf moving like wind around Declan's flailing sword.

He remembered, then, the name Ryn had given him.

"Ciriak..."

He must have spoken louder than intended—or the old elf had hearing surpassing even Ester's—because the Lord Commander paused in the solemn conversation he had been having with the Syr'eshes to look up with a dark eyebrow raised in surprise.

"You know me, human?"

Ester gave the smallest gasp at the question, which Declan almost mirrored. Being addressed directly by what sounded like the second-most powerful dark elf in the entirety of Eserysh was alarming enough, but that was hardly what had him mouthing at the air.

Rather, his surprise came much more greatly from the fact that the Lord Commander had spoken to him not in elvish, but in the common tongue of Viridian.

Taking in the dangerous figure before him, Declan hesitated. On the one hand, the entire reason they had made for the stronghold of the *er'endehn* was the beg for the race's approval of the Accord of Four. That meant—undoubtedly—that some conveyance of Declan's lineage would be in order, but he wasn't sure that then and there was the place to awkwardly explain how it was that he had known the Lord Commander's name.

Fortunately, Bonner's silver tongue came to the rescue.

“He does, as’ahRen. And he’s not the only one.”

The elf looked from Declan to the old mage, then, frowning slightly. For a moment he seemed not to understand, but then his eyes widened and he stepped by the Syr’eshs at once, the officers and soldiers standing in his way parting in a blink.

“Fehn?” the Lord Commander asked, not believing his eyes. “Spirits take me. Bonner *Fehn?*”

“The one and the same, Lord Commander.” Bonner offered the elf a brief bow of respect before looking up again. “Though you were but a major when last we crossed paths, I believe, and I have since wed. I am Bonner ‘yr’Essel’ now.”

The Lord Commander—Ciriak “as’ahRen”, Declan now knew—halted before the old mage to take him in in disbelief. Looking the old mage up and down, he shook his head slowly. “But... How? It’s been centuries, ever since the cliffs...” His eyes, though, shifted briefly from Bonner to Ester, likely observing the green eyes she shared with her father, and understanding seemed to come quickly. “Ah... ‘yr’Essel’. You wed into the *er’enthyl*, Magus?”

“I did.” Bonner offered the elf a smile, then seemed to think it was best to change the subject away from himself. “You’ve kept up with your common, sir. I admit myself impressed.”

“Yes, well...” as’ahRen’s eyes drifted to Declan, then. “Old habits die hard, as they say in your land. And I have to admit I thought it only a matter of time before our people encountered each other again one way or another. Though I must say I hadn’t quite imagined it would be under these... circumstances...”

Circumstances that will require extensive explanation, Lord Commander. I’m afraid Colonel Syr’esh and the others can only convey a fraction of the world’s troubles to you.

Ryn’s statement had everyone in the vicinity turning to him, including not a few residents of the city passing nearby. Their response—surprised but immediate—had Declan thinking again that there was something going on among the elves that he couldn’t quite place.

How had they—even the common passerbys—known to look to Ryn in that moment?

“Oh...!” Ester’s sharp inhale had him turning around again, though, and he cocked his head in confusion at the sight before him.

as’ahRen—the *Lord Commander* of the great race of the *er’endehn*—was bowing to Ryn, and not just in the same manner of respect Bonner had treated him to shortly before. The elf had bent at the hips, one hand in a fist over his heart, his head dipping so low it was nearly past his waist. It was clear, too, that Declan’s astonishment at this was hardly unique. Bonner was blinking in surprise before him, and Ryn himself took a half step away from the officer, clearly taken aback. The elves all around them, too, began murmuring in confusion. There was a flinch of motion, and Declan looked up just in time to see General Syr’esh, standing behind his son, composing his face, which for just an instant looked to have twisted into something like outrage. The aging elf caught Declan’s eye, and a welcoming smile replaced the forced deadpan, making him wonder if he hadn’t imagined the anger.

“Master Ryndean, I beg you to excuse my rudeness.” Ciriak as’ahRen’s voice was even, but he did not lift his head. “I would have introduced myself at once, but Magus F—Magus yr’Essel’s presence caught me off guard. As you have no doubt deduced, I am Ciriak ay’ahSel, Lord Commander of Ysenden’s military and second to the city’s High Chancellor.”

Declan felt his eyes narrow, and he was relieved when Ester and Bonner both seemed to have the same response. Ryn, too, had obviously not missed the oddity in the elf’s statement, because he frowned and moved to stand tall again, looking down on the elf with a frown.

There was no discourtesy to apologize for, Lord Commander, he said calculatingly to the back of ay’ahSel’s head. Given the circumstances, your surprise is understandable. I have to wonder, however, why you have deemed me—of all of my

companions—worthy of this deference. More importantly, however—the dragon’s own white-gold eyes narrowed as he studied the still-bowing man—I would like you to explain how it is that you know my name...

The muttering among the elves redoubled at this, which was to be expected. Thus far the entire conversation had been held largely in common, meaning that Ryn’s words were the first of any significance the surrounding soldiers had heard. Some of the passerbys, too, were starting to linger as a result, and Declan suspected it wouldn’t be long before they began drawing a crowd.

“I wish I had accepted the offer of lessons in your language, now.”

Declan and Ester both looked around. Somehow Lysiat, Aliek, and Tesied had snuck around to stand behind them as the soldiers had started shuffling nervously, with the commander leaning in slightly so they could hear her. She’d spoken slowly enough for Declan to understand, but before either he or Ester could say anything in response the Lord Commander was lifting his head, drawing all eyes again.

“I was notified of your presence some twenty minutes ago,” as’ahRen answered as he stood straight before Ryn again. “By the High Chancellor.”

The dragon’s gaze only grew more suspicious at this, and he spoke again as Ester started translating the Lord Commander’s words for the ay’ahSels over her shoulder in a whisper. *It would seem your master is well-informed. I wonder how he can be so knowledgeable of our coming, and yet fail to be aware of a nest of wights festering not two days from this city...?*

If the dragon’s words were alarming to as’ahRen, the elf showed no signs of it. “Such questions are best posed to him. I will say that you may understand better, once you meet.”

And when will that be?

“Immediately. At the Chancellor’s request. He knows you likely have your own agenda, but he is also aware that you have a... uh... ‘friend’ in the city. He is eager to see you reacquainted.”

“Ah.”

Declan, Ester, and Bonner all made the sound together as the pieces started to click. The elves’ deference to Ryn. Their comfort around him, and their lack of fear. If Arrackes was already known to the *er’endehn*—as the Lord Commander was implying—then it all suddenly made much more sense.

And yet... If the sight of a dragon was already common for the dark elves, then why had no one made mention of it...?

You are aware of Arrackes’ presence? Ryn sounded like he was trying to hide his relief behind a veil of iron. I must admit I’m surprised. Is he well? Why am I not able to sense him?

“Huh.” Declan frowned at these words. Ryn had indeed detected the city from some distance away, but had made no mention of the guardian dragon he had tasked to watch over the elves so many centuries ago. Was it the nature of Ysneden? He’d had trouble extending himself within the Tears. Was it possible the heavy stone of the volcano they stood within was blocking Arrackes from being—?

“He has masked himself from you, for the time being, Master Ryndeal. He apologizes, but feels it is best that you meet again on his terms, so as to avoid a... scene.”

‘Avoid a scene’...? Ryn repeated, sounding like he were starting to get impatient as he crossed his arms.

It was at this moment that Bonner—wisely, Declan thought—decided to keep the conversation from risking derailment.

“as’ahRen,” the mage said, stepping forward, “we have with us nearly one hundred soldiers in various states of exhaustion and injury, many of who require additional aid and *all* of whom have lost half their comrades in the last day. I would politely request that we adjourn this discussion, and that you take us to your High Chancellor as promised. We—as well as Colonel Syr’esh—” he gestured toward the younger of the Syr’eshs still standing nearby “—have much information to impart, all of it only varying levels of critical. I am sure your

master will explain things to our satisfaction upon meeting.” At this point, Bonner looked pointedly at Ryn, trying to get the dragon to reel back his irritation. Ryn obliged, relaxing marginally, and the Lord Commander answered with enthusiasm.

“Agreed. On the subject of my soldiers, please excuse me for a moment.” as’ahRen turned back to the Syr’eshs at this, addressing the the general in elvish. Declan only caught the words “injured” and “health”, which were enough to deduce that the higher officer was being ordered to see the wounded and haggard soldiers treated. As soon as the general nodded in understanding, the Lord Commander looked to Declan and the others again as he indicated that they should get moving.

“*Colonel Syr’esh, you as well,*” as’ahRen said over his shoulder as Ryn started walking in the direction he’d indicated, northwest into the great chamber of the central city.

The Colonel nodded, but hesitated. The pause obviously was not missed by the Lord Commander, who stopped as he’d made to lead them when Declan, Bonner, and Ester all started following behind the dragon with Orsik and Eyera dutifully in tow. as’ahRen offered the younger elf a questioning word which Declan missed, as he did Syr’esh’s response, but Ester was already speaking before he could ask her to translate.

“He wanted to know if something was wrong,” she said quietly. “The Colonel has asked if he is expected to report to the Chancellor.” She frowned as Declan listened. “The Lord Commander has said he is—he doesn’t look please—and Syr’eshs is—Oh.”

The abrupt end to the translation was no issue, because the Colonel’s intensions became clear as he motioned for the attendance of someone behind Declan and Ester. In two steps Lysiat, Aliek, and Tesied were all at their superior’s side, standing at attention with their gazes dutifully raised over the Lord Commander’s head. After a quick exchange of words, as’ahRen gave a nod, then spun away from the lot of them to take lead of the group. As Declan and Ester stepped in behind the man—Ryn and Bonner walking ahead of them again—they were joined by the ay’ahSels *and* the colonel, though none of the elves looked intent on talking while in the presence of their commanding officer.

Smart man, Declan thought, eyeing Syr’esh sidelong. If they were about to have to explain the tale of how it was the *er’endebn* had turned hunting mission into an escort party, then Lysiat and her brothers would be invaluable in completing the story.

Traversing the city was more or less what Declan had expected. Crossing the great ring of stone at an angle—skirting the incredible patch of woodlands at its center—the Lord Commander cut a swath for them through a crowd that seemed much thicker than it had only five minutes before. Had their party been absent as’ahRen’s escort, Declan rather suspected they would have garnered an impressive assembly of onlookers, but as it was no one seemed to want to linger too long around them. Despite the oddity of their presence, despite the dragon, two humans, and half-elf, the Lord Commander’s presence was enough to counter the astonishment and intrigue of the masses. Even Orsik and Eyera, padding along loyally at the the end of the line, got nothing more than scattered, wide-eyed looks and a few whispered words that might have been curses among the dark elf onlookers.

It only made as’ahRen’s aura more imposing, and Declan couldn’t help but watch the old elf as they walked, thinking he knew, now, how it was Amherst al’Dyor had become the most renowned swordsman of his time...

The Lord Commander led them without delay along the ring in a loop about the city, no one speaking a word while they moved. It gave Declan—and the others around him—the opportunity to take in Ysenden’s heart in a bit more detail. Aside from the forest, a market of some sort took up a large swath of the cavern floor, extending from the trees to butt up against the rough-hewn walls of the space. More of the elves’ moonwing lanterns hung over this bazar, the combined illumination of the moths casting shadows over the lowest of the rising floors. In the light, Declan saw a hundred tunnels and doors leading away from the spiraling fairway, the flow of foot traffic stronger here and there, while in other sections only a few people moved about, making him think the labor, commercial, and residential districts of Ysenden were likely separated.

Of the people themselves, Declan saw a range of ages, though he wasn't familiar enough yet with the lifespan of the *er'endebln* to guess at the actual years most of the residents might have been carrying. Additionally, he saw few children moving about, and no adolescents whatsoever. He chalked the latter absence up to the rigorous training the dark elves put their young through from an early age, but the former was more likely due to the low fertility of the race. Indeed, had they been walking through Aletha there would have been as many street urchins and orphans scurrying about as children under the supervision of their parents, with the yells and shouts of the little ones at play—or working—almost as prevalent as the calls of the adults.

It made Declan a little sad, if he was being frank with himself. The city around him was a marvel, as were the capabilities of the *er'endebln* soldiers.

What could the dark elves have achieved, he wondered, if the Mother had granted them the same bounties as man...?

It wasn't too long before the Lord Commander led them to the edge of the cavern ring, where he commandeered one of the blue, finely-crafted gondola platforms with a dip of his head to an attendant dressed in black. The elf leapt to at once, pulling some kind of small, white-and-gold banner from his jacket to hold over the side of the elevator, and almost as soon as Declan and Ester coaxed Orsik and Eyera aboard they were rising steadily upward.

"Oh, well that's a sight..."

Bonner was the first to break the silence as they ascended, and everyone but the warg turned to find the old man looking out over the floor of the cavern while it sped away from them below. He certainly wasn't wrong, and Declan found himself compelled to step up beside the mage to take in the view himself, basking in the colors of the milling crowds, the rise and fall of the other platforms, and the lights of the market that surrounded the trees.

"Incredible..." he muttered.

"Glad you think so."

The Lord Commander's voice, coming from Declan's other side, almost made him start in surprise. He glanced around to find the elf looking down on Ysenden as well with a fond eye, having gotten there without making so much as a sound despite his armor and the fairly-crowded platform.

"Then again, I thought much the same of your cities, during my years spent in Viridian," as'ahRen continued, white-red eyes drifting up as they moved side to side, obviously following the passing floors of the cavern opposite them. "Your walls and turrets and towers."

"I was told the *er'endebln* were masters of such crafts, Lord Commander." Declan was pleased the he managed to keep his voice steady as he replied. "Erraven was a walled city, was it not? Whose ruins still stand, I hear."

as'ahRen offered him a sidelong look, then. "The *er'endebln* are masters of every craft, sir, but we have the time to make such things, the time to devote to grasping the intricacies and expertise in our professions. Man, though..." He chuckled darkly. "It amazes me to this day thinking back, the things man is capable of, despite your oldest living not a tenth of the lifespan we elves can reasonably expect."

"Ha..." Declan matched the *er'endebln*'s somber laugh. "Would you believe me if I said I was thinking something very much to that extent?" When the Lord Commander gave him a sidelong look, Declan gestured out over the open cavern. Before them, what looked like sleet had started to shimmer downward through the air, and he realized with further wonder that the outside hail hadn't been able to reach the bottom of the volcano despite the great opening still high above their heads. "Mankind grows quickly, and we spread quickly. In seven hundred years the *er'endebln* do not seem to have expanded enough to extend themselves out of Ysenden again. Despite that, you thrive in your own way, and manage to create... well, all *this*." Declan couldn't help but let his awe seep into his voice a bit, but he didn't mind.

Ysenden was worthy of that awe.

Beside him, the Lord Commander turned to him with a puzzled expression. “You’re well-informed, for a human.” The elf’s voice was even, but carried a note of interest as he looked Declan up and down, gaze pausing on the hilt of the elven sword on his opposite hip. “I had assumed you were the magus’ apprentice, but you’re more warrior than mage, I think. Who are you, if I might ask?”

Declan opened his mouth, about to answer, but before he could get a word out Ryn’s voice cut him off.

To call Declan Bonner’s apprentice is appropriate enough for the time being, Lord Commander, the dragon said, stepping up to stand just behind them, his height allowing him to see over their heads without issue.

The Lord Commander gave no reaction to this cutting off other than another slight arching of one brow.

“Might I at least ask for your family name Declan...?” he trailed off expectantly.

“His name is Declan Idrys, sir. Please do not judge. Very talented, for a human.”

Lysiat ay’ahSel had apparently deduce the trend of their conversation from Ryn’s words, because she’d spoken up from where she, her brothers, and Colonel Syr’esh were standing, still at attention along one side of the platform. Though the colonel’s mouth twisted in the slightest hint of disapproval, the Lord Commander appeared unbothered by the woman’s insertion into the conversation.

“*Idrys?*” he repeated, a small frown creasing his beard. Then he asked the commander a question Declan didn’t catch.

Fortunately, Lysiat’s answer caught him up.

“I speak simply. For Declan. As he learns.”

“Ah.” The Lord Commander turned back to Declan then, more interested now as they continued to ascend. “You’re learning the language, are you?”

Declan hesitated, not sure of what he should be saying, but a bare nod from Ryn in the corner of his eye told him it was all right.

“Yes, sir,” he answered. “Attempting to, at least. Many have been teaching me, including Bonner—er, Magus yr’Essel—and Esteria.” Declan motioned to Ester, who bobbed her head in greeting as the Lord Commander turned briefly to size her up and down.

“The wood elf dialect is not so different from our own,” as’ahRel said after a moment, nodding in approval. “It would seem you are blessed by the spirits, Declan Idrys. To have such mentors as yr’Essel and his blood, not to mention the praise of our own Commander ay’ahSel...” The elf’s gaze dropped to the sword again. “I knew a youth once, about your age. A human like you. He had a knack for the sword and some small skill with magic. He is... long passed, now, unfortunately.” There was a brief hint of sadness in the creases of the officer’s wrinkles, but it was gone before he continued. “Has humanity forgone its banning of the arcane? I was under the impression your royal family had decreed it illegal some centuries ago.”

Declan smiled slightly, but thought it better not to let slip that he suspected he knew very well who the old elf was referring to. Instead, he gave the Lord Commander a small bow of acknowledgement. “It would seem I am not the only one who is well informed. I am indeed fortunate that the magus has taken me under his wing, and to keep in such great company as Master Ryndean and Esteria. Commander ay’ahSel, too, has been an tutor of immense ability, as have her brothers.”

He chose his words carefully, dodging any specific answer, and he thought he saw Ryn hide a smirk at being called “Master Ryndean”.

“Oh? So the ay’ahSels have been mentoring you...” The Lord Commander’s spoke slowly as Declan straightened, turning away again as he did to study the hail falling in a trailing pillar far before them. “A dragon, a court mage, a wood elf, and our own officers... One must wonder what you have done to earn such instructors, Declan Idrys...”

It wasn't phrased as a question, but Declan suspected the elf intended to get an answer regardless soon enough. For the time being, however, they lapsed into silence again as they reached what had to have been the midway point in their climb, the people far below starting to become indistinct patches of color moving around each other as they went about their day.

Another two minutes or so, and the elevator started to slow. They'd climb high, high enough for the temperature to drop noticeably, and Declan was glad he'd kept the heavy layers of his borrowed armor despite the warmth of the cavern floor far beneath them now. His breath misted before him as the platform finally came to a complete halt, and the moment it stopped moving the Lord Commander was stepping forward to take the lead once more.

"Keep close to your beasts, if you would," he said over his shoulder before moving off the platform to cut through the line of surprised elves who'd been waiting for the elevator. "The highest levels of the city are devoted to the High Chancellor and his council. If the guards here perceive any threat, they will not hesitate to take action."

Declan and Ester glanced at each other at this, then separated without a word to stand outside of Orsik and Eyera respectively. While Ryn and Bonner walked ahead of them, the ay'ahSels and Syr'esh split silently to join them as though reading their sudden concern, Aliek and Tesied walking with Ester, Declan joined by Lysiat and the colonel.

The floor they had climbed to was less-crowded than the bottom of the cavern, but the elves they encountered—most wearing a similar black-and-gold uniform that could only have been soldiers' regulars—still moved out of the way just as promptly when as'ahRen approached. They walked only a short ways along the curving path before the Lord Commander turned left, west into the mountain, and the moment they stepped into the arched ceiling of the tunnel the temperature rose again, like the heat of so many bodies had been trapped within the stone. Despite the narrower path the space was brighter than the entrance tunnel of Ysenden, and though the walls still pressed in and around him, Declan felt less anxious here, the gentler glow of the lanterns hanging every few yards from the apex of the arched ceiling offering a lighter feel to the air.

"*Lysiat*," Declan's curiosity got the better of him as they took a turn in the tunnel, the ground sloping down suddenly. "*You know where we go?*"

The commander, he was surprised to note, was tense. A month past he might not have been able to tell, but the iron-blooded elf blinked at his question, and there was the barest hint of tightness in the parts of her cheeks he could see through her still-donned helmet. What was more, she didn't answer until she'd looked to Colonel Syr'esh for a nod of approval. Sadly, her response was not one Declan knew,

"*Ys livrerus.*"

His frown of incomprehension, fortunately, had her trying again in simpler terms.

"*The great place of study.*"

Though he'd understood this time, it made no more sense to him than her first answer, so Declan left it alone after giving her a word of thanks. Instead, he returned to taking in his surroundings, marveling once more at Ysenden's incredible conception.

Despite the fact that they were going deeper into the rock, the air was still clean, and the bare hint of a faint breeze he could detect on his face and through his hair spoke of some system of ventilation, either by design or construction. It gave these higher tunnels a lighter, breathable feel that did not match the general darkness of the walls, but the elves had broken even this somberness up as well with motifs and lines of color painted every few dozen feet or so. The spaces that they passed, too, were not left to blank stone and rock. Though many of the passages and rooms were obstructed by ornate doors of carved timber, the offshoots and chambers Declan *did* get a chance to peer into briefly were all decorated in some form or fashion, often with pennants and tapestries of various makes, as well as bright whites and reds painted over the earthen walls. For the first time, too, he started seeing once again the curved sword and bow that formed the emblem of Ysenden, most often on the banners, but sometimes carved into the rock and painted blue or green to stand out.

Adding to what seemed to be a growing brightness, as they pressed further into the mountains the soldiers they came across also changed. Declan couldn't have missed the first of the *er'endebrn* they passed dressed in white-and-gold, the tall woman's armor in sharp contrast to the darker hues of Lysiat's and Kellek Syr'esh's beside him. Declan couldn't help but turn and watch her go by as they crossed paths, noting as he did how the other elves in the passage seemed to give her priority in a similar—if lesser—fashion as they did the Lord Commander. Not long after this encounter, however, the *only* soldiers they were running into were all bedecked in a similar fashion, and Declan didn't actually have to speak to get an answer from his *er'endebrn* companions as he glance around at them.

“*Guards.*” The colonel was the one to address his curious look, speaking simply in consideration. “*Of the Chancellor.*”

Declan felt his brow rise at this. “*More dangerous than other soldiers?*”

Syr'esh gave him a small smile. “*More dangerous than some. Not more dangerous than all.*” As he spoke he dipped his head side-long at Lysiat, who turned away from her superior deliberately as though to hide her face.

Declan almost snorted at this. Lysiat ay'ahSel, embarrassed? The colonel had to have just paid her a compliment of some magnitude to get such a response out of the the elf woman, he knew. There had never been any question that the commander was an exceptional talent even among her own kind—who else would have been entrusted with leading a lone hunting party after the drey?—but if the colonel was praising her as more capable than the High Chancellor's own shields...

Declan would have liked to press further, and was busy mulling over how to do so with his limit vocabulary when the Lord Commander turned down yet another passage. Taking the corner, Declan and the others stopped short as they found themselves not in another tunnel, in fact, but rather standing in a deep, ten-foot alcove leading to a set of twin doors that reached the very heights of the ceiling above them. Whereas the wood of the other entrances they'd passed had been ornate and carefully carved, however, *these* doors were plain, adorned only with the emblem of the city and a pair of matching, heavy iron loops for handles. Just the same, Declan had no doubt whatever lay beyond them was likely a great deal more important than anything that might have been hidden among the other chambers in the hollow mountain, because no less than three guards in white-and-gold stood on either side of the recess, looking like they'd been stiff and at attention even before the Lord Commander had arrived accompanied by their strange party. Indeed, the sentries didn't so much as blink until as'ahRen gave a quiet order, at which point the pair closest to the doors moved at once to take firm hold of the handles and heave.

To stand so steady when suddenly faced with a dragon, not even to mention the rest of us..., Declan considered, having to stop himself from shaking his head in amazement. He was already aware that the common soldiers of the *er'endebrn* went through hellish training, and often for longer than the typical man lived, so he couldn't *begin* to imagine was sort of regime these white-clad elves must have gone through on the daily in order to achieve this level of—

But then Declan had to stop thinking, because all he could do was stare.

Despite the blandness of the doors, despite whatever it was he might have been expected, he was not prepared for the sight that lay beyond the entrance opened for them by the Chancellor's Guard. Rather than a tunnel, the alcove swept out onto a spacious platform of polished wood flooring, which itself seemed to be only the largest part of a raised walkway that circled a chamber so massive Declan doubted it would have fit within the largest ballrooms of the al'Dyors' palace in Aletha. It seemed to be a equally as wide as it was broad, but was twice as tall as it could be measured cross-wise. The main floor was below them, accessible via a handsome staircase leading downward directly in front of their group, but the walkway they stood upon was only the first of several that Declan could make out from where he stood. He suspected the existence of a glass ceiling, too, because the place was bathed in grey light, and he could distinctly make out the dull *plinking* of ice against something hard high above them.

What was more fascinating than all that, however, were the books—the thousands on *thousands* of books—that lined every wall and surface he could make out.

The “great place of study” Lysiat had told him they were headed to suddenly made a lot more sense. The chamber was a library, but unlike any library he had ever seen. He couldn’t imagine how many lifetimes it had take to gather such a collection, and as the Lord Commander led them inward Declan could do nothing more than stare in all directions as more and more came into view from beyond the edges of the inner alcove. Sure enough, before long a wide, slanted ceiling of paned glass showed itself, offering enough light despite the stormy day to illuminate the entirety of the chamber. With a clear line of sight of the whole room, other curiosities came into view as well, because Declan was soon not only studying the tomes that lined the innumerable shelves of the place, but also a variety of what looked like artifacts, curios, and treasures that took up deliberate spaces here and there within the cases and on the occasional display tables that had been carefully arranged not to block access to the books. There were swords of every kind, as well as several skulls Declan recognized mostly, with a few exceptions. Gemstones and other bright, glistening rocks added some color here and there, as did the assorted paintings hanging off the walkways so as not to take up wall space. Even more texts, too, were on display, most closed on their pedestals, but a few opened and loose, as though someone had been reading and only recently walked away.

All in all, it was without a doubt the most incredible room Declan had ever had the pleasure of standing in.

“Ryndean? What’s wrong?”

The worry in Bonner’s question was perhaps the only thing that could have made Declan tear his eyes from the wonders of the chamber. Looking around, though, he realized with his own measure of concern that Ryn—unlike the rest of them—had not moved from his place on the other side of the doors as as’ahRen had led the way into the library. Instead, he had stayed put, and by the look of his clenched fists and tight jaw, had no intention of entering just yet.

Before Declan, Ester, or any of the others could say anything else, however, the dragon spoke.

Lord Commander. Is the Chancellor here already?

as’ahRen, who’d turned with the rest of them, didn’t hesitate before nodding.

“He is,” the elf gestured towards the other side of the library, where Declan noticed for the first time another plain, much-smaller door half-hidden hidden among the shelves. “He awaits you in his st—”

In his study, yes, Ryn finished for the Lord Commander, cutting him off. He, too, was looking at the door on the opposite side of the room, his eyes distant, and Declan realized the dragon had likely engaged his senses when they’d paused outside the entrance. Even as they all watched, though, he seemed to come back to himself, standing straighter and muttering to himself in his own language before he at last stepped into the library. To the surprise of most—except as’ahRel, by the look of his steady expression—Ryn swept right by all of them to start moving with purpose around the walkway, his clawed feet clacking with every step over the wooden floor.

“Ryndean!” Bonner hissed, chasing after the dragon as Declan tugged on Orsik’s harness so he, Ester, and Eyera could hurriedly do the same. “Wait! What’s wrong? What’s happening?”

Nothing is wrong, Ryn answered, his words in direct contrast to the irritation blatant in his tone. *Nothing whatsoever is wrong. Between the Queen and the nights and the withholding of truths, I am simply tired of all the deception.*

“Withholding of truths?” Ester echoed from behind Declan as they hurried the warg along after Bonner and the dragon. “What ‘truths’? Whose withholding truths?”

All of them, Ryn answered, waving an impatient hand back to where as’ahRen, Syr’esh, and Lysiat and her brothers had stopped walking, the latter foursome held back at a raised hand by the Lord Commander. *This whole time. Our esteemed escorts, and our courteous ‘host’. We have been misled, it would seem.*

“Misled *how*, Ryn?” Declan demanded. “You’re not making any sense!”

The dragon, though, didn't answer until they were all the way around the room, having taken the final corner in the walkway to come to a halt before the door that apparently led to the High Chancellor's study. Even then, he only spoke as he reached for the plain iron handle, identical to the ones outside the library.

Misled by omission. By the elves and—he heaved at the handle—by my own damn kind.

The door was wrenched outward with a creak of wood, banging against the shelves beside it before coming to rest wide open for them. Declan—and Bonner and Ester on either side of him—tried to peer around Ryn as he stepped inside, but caught only a glimpse of more shelves lining a narrow room that seemed to end in open sky through glass.

I can't sense anyone in this room, he continued. Not a soul. And yet the grand leader of the er'endehn is supposed to be waiting for us here.

With these words, Ryn stepped aside, revealing the rest of the chamber to them.

The space was a handsome study, the books and baubles lining the walls complimented by the scattering of comfortable furniture apparently set about for guests of the room's owner. At the far end of it an ornate desk of carved wood and glossy black stone sat, beyond which the wall was largely comprised of a partial dome made of triangular glass panels that looked out over Eserysh's western expanse, still dim and stormy. Hail *plinked* and *thunked* off this grand window, but it was not the rolling clouds of the far distant horizon that Declan took in. Rather, it was lone individual standing with their back to them on the other side of the desk, silhouetted against the day's grey light.

The lone, *horned* individual.

As Declan understood—Ester and Bonner both hissing out curses on either side of him at the same time—the figure turned towards them, clasping his hands behind himself as he did. His black robes, accented in white and gold, drifted gracefully about him as he moved, and Declan found himself transfixed by a gaze that was both well-known and utterly unfamiliar. Red eyes, as red as blood save for the pale hint of white, vertical pupils, took them all in one at a time before settling on Ryn, at which point the figure dipped his head low in greeting.

Good afternoon, Ryndean, the dragon said, his disembodied voice a deeper timber than the one Declan was used to hearing echo through his head. *It has been too long.*

That it has, Arrackes, Ryn responded dryly, crossing his arms over his bare chest. *Or would you prefer I just call you 'High Chancellor'?*