

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

At Bonner's words, Ryn groaned, which Declan was glad for.

It meant he didn't have to.

Ever since the decision had been made to seek out the assistance of the *er'endebrn*—and hopefully convince their High Chancellor to bring them into the Accord of Four—Declan had spent more time than he cared to think about dwelling on the unpleasant history of the dark elves he was aware of. As far as he knew they had always been a martial people, unparalleled in discipline and combat, but before the rise of the Endless Queen that temperament had also led to one steady presence in the lives of the race:

War.

Eserysh—according to Ryn and Bonner, at least—had originally been a realm divided into a multitude of city-states, nations onto themselves, each wielding its own might and power. Conflict had been a constant truth, and though neither the dragon nor the mage had gotten into any great detail on the subject, Declan could only imagine the sort of bloodshed that such strained relations must have caused.

And then, over the course of two years—a blink in the life of an elf—nearly every one of those bastions had fallen to Sehranya, leaving only Ysenden as the last hope of the *er'endebrn* fleeing the ruins of their homes.

All at once, it made sense to Declan.

“Now we know why, at the very least,” he grumbled, bringing a hand up to rub at his eyes with thumb and forefinger.

Know what? Ryn asked him first.

It was Ester—apparently catching on as quickly as Declan had—who answered for him.

“Why the Queen has started her attack *now*.”

“Precisely.”

Declan looked up as Bonner agreed. The old man hadn't turned to look at them, and was watching the officers before them as they talked hurriedly among themselves, clearly debating a hundred different factors of what they had just heard. Even y'Rehl had joined them, while Tesied and Aliek had moved to stand behind their sister, frowning in the direction of their huddled superiors.

“I've been thinking the same thing since I first sat down with this lot,” Bonner continued, nodding at the *er'endebrn*. “It's not just what they say. It's how they act. There's tension, there. Bottled up like a coiled snake.”

“More than one snake,” Declan added quietly. “I saw it the moment Ryn asked about Ysenden. Two or three of them didn't like hearing it called ‘the seat of power.’”

Ryn seemed to catch on, white-gold eyes widening, but he could say nothing more aloud without alerting all in the room to the conversation, so he just nodded slowly.

“Their vulnerable,” Ester was the one to voice it. “Weak.”

“Weakened, at the very least,” Bonner agreed. “It's been seven hundred years since the catastrophe that brought them together was eradicated, and these are not men with their short lifespans. The dark elves have raised a generation in that time? Maybe two? And the oldest among them have neither faded away nor forgotten.”

“But why attack *mankind*?” Declan had to ask. It was the one thing he didn't follow. “If the *er'endebrn* are vulnerable, why didn't she attack them?”

Ester looked about to answer, but hesitated, clearly mulling over the question. Ryn, on the other hand put a hand on Bonner's shoulder, and the mage tilted his head in the dragon's direction a moment before nodding and speaking what was obviously a passed-along answer.

“Because an outright assault would unite them.” The mage tossed a thumb over his shoulder at the still-gathered officers. “It would be the one thing that would solidify them once again.” Another pause as Ryn spoke to him privately again. “Besides, Sehranya tried once to take Ysenden with force, and she broke on the city walls.” Bonner shook his head. “She might never have been one for strategy, but it's likely she learned her lesson from *that* failure, given what it cost her in the end.”

“Meaning what?” Declan asked.

“Meaning that there's more than one way to deal with the *er'endebrn*,” Ester said quietly, and when he looked around at her Declan was alarmed to find her watching the dark elves with narrowed eyes.

“Right again, Esteria,” Bonner muttered in confirmation. “Why waste the time and energy of many, when only a few might suffice...”

“I’m not following,” Declan admitted, brow furrowing as he, too, continued to watch the elves.

It was Ryn, privately, who enlightened him.

We assumed mankind was the sole race that the Endless Queen has declared war on, since Viridian is the only kingdom to have been attacked. The dragon shook his head as Declan turned to look at him. *But what if that’s not true? Sebranya very likely has at least one apprentice, at least one helping hand that we know of who has already infiltrated the world of man.* Ryn’s eyes gleamed in the light of the brazier as he took in the higher officers, his gaze sliding across one elf after another, then even to the ay’ahSels. *Is it so great a stretch to think she might have found herself such assistance among the er’endehn as well?*

For the remainder of the meeting Declan couldn’t stop himself from resting his left hand on theommel the dark elf blade on his hip. It was a vain comfort—he doubted he’d so much as be able to draw the sword completely before someone among the *er’endehn* liberated his hand from his arm—but it was a comfort nonetheless. Despite their unfamiliarity—despite the strangeness of their language, the rigidity of their cultures, and the novelty of their features—Declan realized now that he had felt *safe* for a minute, just that brief time it had taken y’Rehl to walk them through the camp and into the colonel’s pavilion. It had been alien to him, and perhaps a little cold, but there had been a steadiness to the surroundings, in that taste of civilization he hadn’t had in the long weeks since he, Ryn, Bonner, and Ester had left the city of Ranheln behind, along the King’s High Road.

Now, abruptly, Declan felt hardly safer standing in that tent than he might have lost on his own among the thickening pines of the Vyr’esh that towered not a minute’s walk up the shore outside, Ryn’s echoed words interrupting ever other cohesive thought.

Is it so great a stretch to think she might have found herself such assistance among the er’endehn as well?

Declan had to struggle to focus, after that, had to work to hear Ester’s translation after the higher officers had finished with their mutterings and returned to the interrogation at hand. Lysiat ay’ahSel was once again grilled by Syr’esh and the others—in particular about the tunneler and its defeat—and over the course of another half hour proved not only unrelenting in their questioning, but also more knowledgeable in the subjects they were pursuing than Declan expected. He hadn’t wondered before why the elves hadn’t thought the *drey* enough evidence to seriously consider the possibility of the Queen’s revival, but Syr’esh’s older subordinates were quick to advise the younger colonel on the stitched nature of the “winged ones”. It turned out that the working theory had been that the *drey* the ay’ahSel twins had already reported on were remnants of the old war, granted longevity by the dragon flesh that made up a portion of their bodies, but this idea was cast aside as soon as the nature of the tunneler was revealed. It was impressive, truthfully, to watch the *er’endehn* discuss the wurm’s Purpose so matter-of-factly, collectively agreeing unanimously that the presence of the black magic was indisputable. Despite their aversion to spellcraft, the elves seemed as familiar with the subject as Ryn and Bonner were, and far more so than Declan. They concluded with not even a minute’s debate that if the tunneler had been cursed with a Purpose during the war, the feral drive of the magic would have made it known eons ago. The wurm, all agreed, was newly-cursed.

Sehranya lived.

And lingers closer than you might realize... Declan couldn’t help but think again, unable to stop from studying the elves even as they seem to conclude their interrogation of Lysiat ay’ahSel. The revelation weighed on him, now that Ryn and the others had opened his eyes to it. Sehranya, weaving insurrection among the *er’endehn*. He knew, of course, that even if this were true it was unlikely the traitor—or traitors—stood there in the tent with them. This was an outpost, a base camp, and despite the clear influence Syr’esh wielded, he was yet only a colonel.

Just the same, Declan couldn’t stop his palms from sweating as he stood among his friends, nor his mind from reaching for the familiar weave of the firestone in his breath pocket, warm and steady against his chest.

When the last of the questions had finally been answered, there was a final discussion among the officers—kept brief this time—before they all seemed satisfied that they’d gathered all the information they were going

to. Eventually, it was towards *him* that most eyes fell, and the trepidation Declan was working hard to wrangle slipped loose. As Colonel Syr'esh stepped towards him, Declan fought not to swallow nervously, and he deliberately dropped his hand from the sword at last in an attempt not to seem suspicious.

Syr'esh, of course, didn't miss the moment.

"*Vebt, y ven nevyl,*" he said with a light laugh, coming to stand before Declan.

"Human, you seem nervous," Declan understood even before Ester translated for him quietly from his side.

He worked up a smile. "Forgive me, Colonel. All I've been made to know of your people is your prowess for battle. Traveling these last days beside Commander ay'ahSel—and her unit before that—has only convinced me I *should* be nervous when within a sword's reach of any of you."

As Ester turned the words, a glimmer of amusement seemed to shine in Syr'esh's firm gaze.

"And here I have been told my whole life than mankind is a rash and petulant race. I admit you have me questioning that a little, Declan Idrys."

"A low bar to beat, sir," Declan answered, keeping his smile.

The colonel almost grinned then, he was sure of it. "Perhaps," Ester continued translating it for dark elf. "But if half of what ay'ahSel would have us believe is true, I would say you a raising that threshold rapidly." Syr'esh's gaze dipped, then, taking in first Declan's shirt, then his belt, pants, and boots. "And judging by your state, I'm inclined to believe her..."

The colonel raised a hand, and the closest of the officers—Major y'Rehl—stepped forward to attend him at once.

"*Hal?*" she asked formally, and Declan understood the addressing of the colonel even without Ester having the time to translate.

"See Idrys fit with clean clothes and armor. Tell the quartermaster she may use any of my own spares if needed, given he and I are nearly of a size." Syr'esh half-turned, then, but it wasn't at the major he looked. "Commander—" Lysiat ay'ahSel, who had been watching the proceedings with subtle interest, at last jumped up from her box to stand at attention, clearly feeling better following Bonner's ministrations "—this sword you've lent him. May he keep it?"

Declan's mouth fell open, but before he could say a word in surprise or protest y'Rehl beat him to it.

"*Hal!*" the major hissed, clearly not believing her ears. "*Yl vebt! Yl mytosyl!*"

Again, there was no need for Ester translation even as it came.

"Colonel!" the major had protested. "He is human! He is a mage!"

There came a grumbling of likeminded ascent from among the other officers—and Declan even thought Tesied ay'ahSel, over by his sister, looked momentarily torn—but the colonel didn't so much as deign the dissenters, including y'Rehl, with a glance.

"I am aware." Ester was quick in her turning of his answer, though she didn't manage to capture the coolness Declan detected in Syr'el's own words. "He is also, apparently, the sole reason we now find ourselves furnished with critical information, not to mention Commander ay'ahSel's return. I do not recall you having anything to say cross-wise when we provided *yr'Essel* with armor and a bow." He indicated Ester with a loose hand as he spoke.

Well that explains that, Declan thought, looking side-long at the half-elf. He'd been wondering how she'd come to be outfitted in dark elf leathers, not to mention the bow she still held in one hand and the quiver of arrows on her lower back that had probably lost a few shafts when she'd tackled him.

"She is cousin, Colonel," one of the officers, the one with the eye-patch, spoke up in y'Rehl's defense. "*Er'enthyl.* She can be trusted."

"As can he, according to our field agents." Syr'esh continued not to look around at his officers, though his tone was growing more and more stern. "And *that*—" he cut off y'Rehl as the major looked about to speak again "—will be the end of the discussion. Commander!" Lysiat ay'ahSel brought herself up ramrod straight by the crates. "I asked you a question. The sword. Can he keep it?"

"Yes, sir," Ester translated the commander's quick answer. "If I can supply myself with another from our cache?"

"Add that to the list for the quartermaster," Syr'esh said over his shoulder to a stone-faced y'Rehl, turning towards Declan again. "Do you require anything else?"

It took Declan a few seconds to realize the colonel had been addressing *him*.

“Me?” he asked, stupefied. He had to admit he was more than a little pleased to hear he would be allowed to keep the blade ay’ahSel had lent him, but being asked directly by the camp commander if he had any personal requests was almost alarming.

Again, the hint of a smile from Syr’esh.

“Yes. You. I do not carry debt gracefully, Declan Idrys. You have returned to us one of our most promising junior officers, risking your life in the process, and the information this has subsequently provided us may well prove invaluable. The *er’endehn* are indebted to you, *despite what my officers may say.*”

These last words were said with force, which—despite the colonel never looking around—had several of the subordinates in question closing mouths that had just opened as though ready to protest.

Declan, too, had been about to start answering, about to say he was already grateful for the blade and would be doubly so for a change of clothes, but he stopped himself short. Considering the colonel carefully, he looked then to the higher officers and the sour expressions they were hiding with varying levels of success. None of them were likely to be among Sehranya’s turncoats if she had any, it was true, but there was always the risk.

In fact, in the entirety of the pavilion, there was only a single member of the *er’endehn* that Declan was *sure* could be no traitor. Sehranya, for some reason, wanted him dead, along with Ryn, Bonner, and Ester, and there was only one elf who’d had ample opportunity to see him cut down without drawing attention to himself, but had failed to do so. If he allowed himself to be a little greedy in his request, Declan might just earn him and his friends at least one ally they could trust without question among the dark elves.

And maybe even inch a little closer to Herst’s legend in the process...

“Training, sir,” Declan said at last.

Syr’esh, after Ester had translated for him, didn’t blink or move, but Declan could tell all the same he was surprised when the colonel repeated the request back to him.

“Training, you say...? And in what discipline?”

“The blade, if I could be so bold.”

Ester made an ‘oh’ sound beside him before turning the words, and this time Syr’esh’s brow rose.

“I would assume you a capable swordsman, if you made it this far through the Vyr’esh, Declan Idrys. Are you really in need of additional instruction?”

“I am capable, sir, and that is thanks to an excellent teacher.” He felt Ryn shift ever so slightly beside him, but continued on. “But even he has admitted to coming up short when it comes to swordsmanship. I fear I cannot compare to the ability of the *er’endehn* I have seen in action.”

The colonel was silent again a moment as he took in Ester’s words, watching Declan a little more intently now. Nothing had changed in the dark elf’s face or countenance, not a twitch or shift in his posture or bearing. Just the same, though, Declan could tell he was being scrutinized more carefully all of a sudden, like the officer were trying to take in his mettle in an attempt measure his worth.

Then abruptly, Syr’esh relaxed, raised one hand to rub at his neck in thought, and finally nodded.

“So be it,” he said, and—despite several spasms of anger from the other officers at his back—no one spoke up in objection this time. “If I had to guess, I’d assume you already have a teacher in mind as well?”

Declan, despite himself, grinned ever so slightly.

“Yes, sir.” Lifting a hand, he pointed across the pavilion. “Someone who handles a blade better than anyone I’ve ever know.”

All about the space, every head turned to follow his finger. Only one figure stood unmoving, looking as though she were struggling to hide what might have been a half-annoyed, half-amused expression.

In the end, Lysiat ay’ahSel cocked an eyebrow at Declan as he smiled at her, not seeing Aliek’s stern frown or Tesied turn his face away to hide a grin.

“I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again: you’re a clever boy, Declan. I’ll give you that.”

Declan nodded his appreciation up at Bonner beside him, who was seated comfortably atop a content Orsik as they walked. The warg had been nearly as delighted to find the mage as he had Eyera, and would likely

have knocked the old man flat on his ass the moment they'd been dismissed from the tent were it not for Bonner's deceptive strength.

"Two birds, one stone," Declan credited himself, looking back at Ryn walking side-by-side with Ester at their back, Eyerá taking up their rear. "I'd assumed you were going to push to have be trained by someone among the *er'endeahn* anyway, when you had the chance?"

A was, the dragon nodded, skirting the hot edge of a brazier they passed, ignoring the curious glances of the dark elf soldiers gathered around its other side for warmth. *Though I did have someone other than the commander in mind. For you and Ester both, in fact, but it seems you've each taken care of that on your own.*

Someone else? Declan thought, a little surprised by that, but for the moment he was more interested in the second part of Ryn's statement, and he looked around at Ester. "You're training?"

"I'd hardly call it that," the half-elf told him with a snort. "The ay'ahSel brothers, Aliék and Tesied. I've picked up a thing or two watching them, but I get the sense they were more interested in me than in *teaching* me."

"Interested in... you?" Declan repeated, feeling something itch uncomfortably at his chest.

Ester nodded, seeming somewhere between amused and annoyed. "And you. They'd just started pestering me about what kind of person you were when the four of you decided to show up. Apparently they'd been trying to drag information out of me for days, if politely."

"Ah." Declan hoped he didn't sound *too* relieved as he looked forward again, following Bonner as the mage guided Orsik around a quick right and left. "I supposed that makes sense. I would have wanted to know what kind of blundering oaf *my* sibling may have been dragged off by, if I'd been in their shoes."

Ester let slip a laugh at that, and Bonner and Ryn both grinned, leading Declan to do the same. It was a strange feeling, but not unwelcome. He had missed his companions, he'd realized not long after finding himself among them once more, missed their presence and their warmth. While Lysiat hadn't been a *poor* comrade over the last week or so, the disparity in language had made things difficult, conversation absent as it was. It had felt almost bizarre, for just a second, when he'd explained his plan to his three friends as soon as they'd been out of earshot of the dark elves and watched them follow his logic at once. It was a breath of fresh air, especially when all of them had seen the soundness of his idea. If Lysiat ay'ahSel had wanted him dead, he would be dead, they all agreed.

It was both affirming and a little deflating to think about.

Still, they had an ally, now, or as close as they were going to get for the time being. *If* Sehranya had her claws in the *er'endeahn*, they had direct access to at least one officer they knew they could trust, even if she was only a commander. In the meantime, they would just have to stick to the plan, and pray to the Mother above they would reach Ysenden and its High Chancellor before whatever traitors might be lingering among the ranks of the dark elves made their first move. For this reason, Declan was doubly grateful Syr'esh had acceded to his request for training. If they were about to plow head-first into what sounded like a brewing conflict among the *er'endeahn* themselves, then he needed to improve in his combat prowess, and improve fast.

What was more, it seemed Declan wasn't the only one to have his abilities on the mind.

As the reached the western edge of the camp and made for the trees of the Vyr'esh itself—Bonner had apparently chosen to fabricate a structure for them, rather than accept a tent for the elves—the mage shifted atop Orsik to look down at him.

"Declan... I have a question."

Declan blinked, turned to meet the old man's eyes. "Yes?"

"The wurm. Its death. Did it happen as the commander said?"

Declan frowned, then nodded, following a path made by foragers through the snow as Orsik plowed his own way towards the forest a little to his right.

"Meaning she was also correct in saying you were unconscious for two days?"

Declan nodded again. "That's right. I think I would have been out for more, if the situation hadn't called on her screaming at me. I'm pretty sure ay'ahSel would have stabbed me in the thigh to try to get wake me up if I hadn't come to when I did."

"The wolves, yes. I recall." Bonner was watching him carefully again, as he had when ay'ahSel had been telling her story.

“Did I... do something wrong?” Declan asked eventually. He knew the answer, of course, or thought he did. He’d cast aside every lesson the mage had taught him to weave the spell that had proven the end of the risen tunneler, and he’d suspected—even before he’d cast it—that Bonner would have his head if he survived. Apparently the time for punishment had come due.

As it turned out, however, he was a little off the mark.

The only think wrong is that you’re standing right now.

It was Ryn how answered, and Declan turned to see the dragon following his path while Ester and Eyera had chosen to tail Orsik’ along the male’s new trail. He raised an eyebrow, and the dragon gestured towards him with a clawed hand.

I’m not exaggerating, Declan. You’re—quite literally—a walking miracle, at the moment, if it all happened as you and the commander say.

“Why is that?” Ester had to call out from the other side of a heavy pine as they finally stepped into the trees, leaping the bank of snow that had gathered along the base of the trunks that lined the shore. “It’s been days since he woke up.”

“Days that are hardly enough time to recover from arcane fatigue, as you should know, Ester.” Bonner frowned around at his daughter as they came about the other side off the massive evergreen. “I’m disappointed. Has it been so long since we’ve covered the basics? Perhaps I should have you join Declan in his lessons, now that we can resume them. He’s getting very near that point in his education.”

Ester, for her part, smiled nervously and waved the one hand not still holding her new bow in declination. “No thank you. I found the laws of magic boring enough the *first* time you taught them to me, and that was before we realized how little talent I have for it all. Just answer the question, Father: why is it strange that Declan is standing right now?”

Bonner continued to watch his daughter disapprovingly for a moment as they headed a little deeper into the shadows of the woods, but finally turned about again as the sound of the wind and camp faded a bit at their backs.

“As talented as you are—” he addressed Declan “—I hope you would agree that you are very new to the arts of magic. Correct?”

“Correct...” Declan concurred, no sure where this was going.

“And you would agree that I—and Ryn, for that matter—are *not* new to this?”

“I would...”

“Good. Then tell me, Declan: what happens when either Ryn or I overextend ourselves? When we apply more to the weaves than we should?”

Declan frowned, following now. He had seen Bonner brought low by such an over-expenditure twice that he could recall. Most recently it had been when he’d practically pieced Ester’s body back together in the unyielding stone of the Mother’s Tears, but more alarming was the first time.

The drey attack.

The assault by the imbued creature had nearly cost the mage—and Ryn—their lives. The old man had strained himself to the point of keeling over as he’d helped the dragon first in fighting the beast, then in preventing him from plummeting to the ground after Ryn had fainted in mid-air. The toll of the weaves had been so great that Bonner hadn’t been able to conjure up more than a protective barrier to shield the two of them when the drey had crawled out of the hole the dragon had put it in, and after *that* nightmare had come to an end Bonner had been tired for days.

As for Ryn himself, Declan already knew the cost the dragon had to pay to take on his true form. He’d witnessed his friend sleep for a full night and day after that same fight with the drey, and it was longer still before Ryn had felt well enough to travel.

“You’re... tired,” Declan finally answered the mage’s question, internally wincing at the lameness of his question. “*Very* tired.”

At his side, Bonner brought Orsik up short.

“No, boy,” the old man said, still looking down on him as Declan stopped beside the warg. “We are *expended*. We are *empty*, or as close to empty as we can be without putting ourself in danger. You’ve experienced a little of this, I know. Have our lessons left you bright? Has summoning your flames again and again left you cheery and full of life?”

“... No,” Declan conceded. “I’m exhausted.”

It was true, too. He’d complained to Ester about it more than once. Bonner’s training had always been nearly as draining as Ryn’s was, when Declan and the half-elf had spared against the dragon for hours on end. He’d always attributed it to mental fatigue, but something told him Bonner was about to correct him on that concept.

“Of course you are.” Swinging a foot off the warg, Bonner slid from the animal’s back to land with a light *thump* in the lighter dusting of snow beneath the trees. “Something cannot be made from nothing, Declan. Magic is not free.” The mage stepped forward to stand in front of him, then, and despite the fact that the man was a good foot shorter, Declan found himself holding his breath. Given his usually-joyful nature, it could be easy to forget who the man was.

Bonner yr’Essel—formerly Bonner Fehn—court magus of the last king to have ruled Viridian when magic still held sway within the realm of man.

“We haven’t gotten so far into your lessons, Declan, so I will spare you the minutia for the moment. Rather, picture this: a common man, ignorant of his innate potential for the arcane, is like a born peasant. He is poor, and he has little, but he is not absent that which gives a man meaning in life. He is capable of joy, capable of purpose. Do you follow?”

Declan nodded hesitantly, completely at a loss as to where this metaphor was going.

“Now, imagine the awaking of that man’s magic as the peasant coming into wealth. Usually—like in most cases of learning mages—this happens slowly. Little by little. The peasant has the opportunity to adapt to his gold, to learn how best to spend it so he does not end up without again.”

Bonner paused to make sure he was paying attention, and Declan nodded once more to show that he was.

“Eventually the hope is that the peasant is no longer a peasant, but a rich and affluent individual, granted access by his wealth to all the wonders and curiosities of the world. The equivalent of a mage of power and ability.” Bonner brought a finger up to the side of his nose. “Now, imagine if you would, what would happen if an event occurred that required that man to expend all his wealth at once, to empty his coffers, leaving himself with nothing.”

Declan was starting to follow, finally. “You mean as a mage might if they needed to cast a spell beyond their usual ability...?”

“Exactly like a mage might, yes. The man is left penniless. What happens to him?”

“He goes back to being poor.”

“As the same man he was?”

Declan shook his head, seeing at last what Bonner was getting at. “No. He goes back to being poor, but now he knows what it is like to live a life of wealth.”

“Yes,” Bonner agreed like they had arrived at his point. “And this can have a variety of effects on a person, depending on who they are. Perhaps he picks himself out of the dust and strives to build his riches up again. Perhaps he turns his back on that path and seeks to find the simpler pleasures he once enjoys.” The old mage frowned, dropping his hand from his face. “Or perhaps he gives up, and takes his own life in the despair of having lost so much.”

It’s much the same for mages, Declan. Ryn picked up for the man. Only more... physiologically. It is called ‘arcane fatigue’. The body adapts, you see, when one’s magic is awakened. It begins to depend on it, like it might if you suddenly grew a second heart that helps alleviate the workload of your first. Usually this happens over time, little by little, as Bonner said. It gives learning mages the opportunity to adjust to their ‘changing’ bodies, to learn the limits, and how to overcome them safely. This means that if they do dig too deep—if they are foolish enough or are forced to draw on too much of their magic—the fatigue they suffer can be mitigated and lessened.

“This is what has happened to Ryn and I,” Bonner started up again as the dragon finished, Orsik snorting and ambling off behind him to nuzzle his sister again. “We have suffered fatigue before—you have seen it—but *our* bodies’ have been tempered to our magic for centuries, boy. A good night’s rest, and we are often in fighting form again.” The mage shook his head sadly. “But this is not the case for many, and certainly not all. There are those who succumb to fatigue that do not wake for days, Declan, as you did.”

“And others that do not wake at all...” Ester muttered from where she stood by the ward, and Declan saw that she had brought a hand up to rest on Eyer’s shoulder, as though seeking comfort as she watched him in concern.

Declan, though, wasn't looking for worry, in that moment.

"Why didn't I know this?" he demanded of Bonner, more alarmed than angry. "Why didn't you tell me?"

The old mage opened his mouth to answer, but paused, closing it again and looking at Ryn. For a moment Declan thought the two of them were communicating once more, but when he turned to the dragon Ryn was watching *him*.

To be completely honest... his friend answered after a moment, sounding a little at a loss for words. We didn't expect it to be any issue you would suffer, Declan. At least not anytime soon.

Declan blinked at him. "You never thought I would expend more magic than was safe?" he asked, trying not to sound too sarcastic. "Ryn, we've been attacked by ghouls, wights, drey, wereyn, and now a damn *wrum* the size of a market square. *How could you think it might not happen?*"

"Ryndean misspeaks, boy," Bonner cut in before the dragon could answer. "It is not that we never thought you *would*. It's that we never thought you *could*."

Declan turned back to him, confused now. "How do you mean?"

"I mean that you're a bloody prodigy!" It was the mage's turn to sound almost a little angry now. "I mean that in the *weeks* that you have been learning the arts, you've made the progress that others take ten times as long to accomplish! Think of Ester!" He shot an apologetic look at his daughter before continuing. "Years of work, Declan. Years!"

"And all I'm good for is starting the camp fire," the half-elf added with acerbic cheer.

Declan knew this, too. Had seen it. He'd been impressed the one and only time Ester had summoned up a fistful of flame for them to make *exactly* this point, but that had included the assistance of a firestone as a channel and it was obvious that small flash of magic had been difficult and painful.

"Your magic is—*literally*, Declan—growing at an alarming rate," Bonner continued as Declan pondered. "We've been saying it for months: your King's blood means your body in a vessel of incredible potential. It has *always* been. But you are filling that vessel at a terrifying pace. Forget the peasant growing his wealth over the years. Your body is more like a beggar being made king overnight!"

Declan smirked at that, about to accuse the man of hyperbole, but Ryn cut him off.

There's not an ounce of exaggeration in what Bonner is telling you, Declan. You can't see it—not yet—but the reason he and I had no fear that you would overextend yourself is because we didn't think you had the capability. Your pool of arcanic energy has outpaced the magic you've been learning by margins. It's why you no longer feel exhausted despite using your weaves so much more frequently.

Declan's smirked turned into a weak sort of grimace. Bonner he could accuse of overexcitement, even despite the situation.

Ryn, he could not.

"So... what?" he asked. "I should be dead? I should have died after taking down the worm?"

"Possibly," Bonner muttered, taking on that not-uncommon air of academic interest. "Unlikely, though, given your dragon's gifts. I'm less impressed by your survival than I am by your *condition*. Arcanic fatigue is not limited to your next rest. It lingers, in new mages. Keeping to the metaphor, if you were made a king overnight, that spell you and Commander ay'ahSel have described would not be unlike having your royal ass thrown into the gutters. You should be suffering, or at least exhausted."

"Maybe he's just recovered naturally?" Ester asked from the side where she stood on her own now, Orsik and Eyerá having ducked off to play again among the trees.

"No, that's not it either." Bonner was peering at Declan's body as though it were some broken machine that needed fixing, as though there might be a belt or gear loose somewhere he could just replace. "Judging by your reserves, you haven't even recouped as much as I would have expected if you'd really awoken four days ago."

Declan, for once, thought he had the answer to this quandary, but the rest of what the man had said caught him by surprise. "You can *see* my reserves of magic?" he asked with wide eyes. When Bonner didn't answer him, he turned instead to Ryn, but the dragon held up both hands to stop him as he shook his head.

Don't look at me. That's a gift earned, not born with. I can't see more than a dirty ex-mercenary in desperate need of new clothes.

"And a bath," The mage muttered, proving he was still listening. Declan was about to comment—not for the first time—about self-cleaning robes, when Bonner's green eyes narrowed.

“That’s strange…” the old man muttered, stepping closer and bringing his face so close to Declan’s left arm that his nose almost touched the claw-torn remnants of his sleeve. “Declan… are you channeling a weave other than your spell of warmth.”

“Yes,” Declan told him. “I was going to say as much a second ago. I figured something out while we were separated.”

“Figured what out?” Ester asked curiously, looking him up and down like she might see whatever it was her father was scrutinizing.

Before Declan could tell her, though, the mage himself gave a *whoop* of excitement.

“Gods, boy!” Bonner exclaimed, taking Declan’s arm in both hands suddenly, his grip like warm steel as he turned to lift the limb in presentation. “Ryndean! Look at this! *Look at this!*”

I just said I’ve not got your eye, the dragon grumbled, but he—and Ester with him—moved forward to gather around the two men just the same. *Just tell us what you can see!*

“Suffusion!” Bonner was practically squealing, and Declan actually winced as the mage squeezed his arm in his enthusiasm, muscle and bone protesting under the mage’s natural strength. “Bloody *corpomancy!* He’s figured suffusion out all his own!”

Ryndean, for his part, gaped first at Bonner, then at Declan, then back again as Ester frowned in obvious loss beside him.

Then the dragon too was snatching at Declan, taking up his other arm in clawed hands.

What?! Not possible. Declan, pull against me.

“Wait,” Declan tried to interrupt, at a loss for what was going on. “What’s suffusion? I was trying to tell you, I think I figured out how to—”

Just pull! the dragon cut him off, staring at the arm he was holding like it had turned to gold.

Declan—feeling as baffled as Ester looked—decided it was best to do as he was told, and tugged against Ryn’s grip even as he focused on his spell of strengthening to make sure the weakened limb wouldn’t betray him.

The dragon—a moment ago looking as excited as Bonner—appeared immediately disappointed, and he released the arm to frown at the mage.

Are you sure? I don’t notice any difference. If anything he—

“Declan,” Bonner looked to him even as he waved off the dragon’s words, “release your suffusion.”

“M-my what?” Declan stammered. “I’m telling you, I’ve figured out how to—!”

“Your suffusion, boy!” Bonner was almost shouting with impatient excitement. “Your weave of strength! The corpomancy that’s been keeping you upright for days now, I would wager!”

“Suffusion?” Ester asked. “Corpomancy? Is that… *body* magics? What kind of spell is—?”

Then, though, she gasped, because Declan was sagging in Bonner’s grip.

He might now know what the man was talking about—had he been incorrect to believe he deduced imbuement?—but it was obvious he wasn’t going to get answers until he did as he was told. With less than a thought he withdrew the spell, pulling it away from his body, and at once the fatigue returned. His legs nearly buckled as the support of the magic was taken away, and even his head felt suddenly heavier after all morning spent riding. If Bonner hadn’t been holding him up, Declan was quite sure there was a real possibility he’d have ended up with his ass in the snow again.

“Oh!” Ester exclaimed, rushing forward to grab him by the other arm and help hoist him back up. “Declan!”

What is this? Ryn asked in alarm. Bonner, what’s wrong with him?

“Nothing whatsoever is wrong with him,” the mage said with a grin, looking up into Declan’s face. “Good, that’s good, boy. Call on it again. You’re damned heavy, even for a lunk of bone and brawn.”

Declan nodded numbly, and it took him a few seconds to gather the spellwork again. As the weave spread through his body once more, though, he stood up straight, realizing he could even *breath* easier with the magic’s assistance.

“*Now* will you tell me what you’re talking about?” he demanded of Bonner, pulling his arm loose of the old man’s grasp—though he didn’t make a move to step away from Ester’s as she hesitated to let go of him. “What ‘body magics’? Is that what happened?”

Happened? Ryn asked, scrutinizing him more carefully now. What do you mean?

“I had a moment when I was dragging ay’ahSel out of the tunnel,” Declan explained, though he didn’t look away from the mage. “The magics acted on their own, giving me strength. It’s the only thing that got both of us out of the way of that damn wurm. I thought it was imbuelement, like the drey. I’ve been working on figuring it out ever sense.”

To his surprised, Bonner made a face at that.

“Oh no. Most certainly *not* imbuelement, Declan, no. This—” he poked the scarred arm he’d just let go—“*this is suffusion*, or at least the beginning vestiges of it. A basic form of corpomancy: the art—as Ester has deduced—of bolstering one’s own body and mind with magic. And as for that little show of you falling apart—” Bonner turned disapprovingly to Ryn “—that was the arcanic fatigue you’ve been holding at bay with sheer *will*.”

The dragon, for his part, blinked.

Then, jaw slackening, he looked to understand.

He’s been holding himself together, he muttered, sounding astounded. *By constantly channeling the weave, he’s been keeping the exhaustion at bay.*

“Excuse me!” Ester half-shouted as she let go of Declan at last, raising her free hand in the air like a school child as she glared between the dragon and her father. “For those of us *who have no idea what you two are talking about*, an explanation would be appreciated!”

“Seconded,” Declan said with a curt nod. “You’re leaving us behind again. This *isn’t* imbuelement?” He flexed one arm and made a fist, feeling the faint tingling of the magic thrum as he did.

Ryn and Bonner exchanged another look, and seemed to decide silently that the dragon was the better choice to explain this time.

No. Not imbuelement, Declan, he repeated. *That is a dark art, requiring the taking of another creature’s or being’s life force and infusing it permanently into another’s bones and body as strength. It is cruel spellwork, with the victim dying slowly as their heart and lungs grow too weak to beat, or else left eternal depleted and crippled if the necromancer is feeling merciful.*

“Necromancer?” Ester repeated in a hiss.

Ryn nodded. *My understanding is it’s theoretically possible to imbue a living thing, but it involves the carving of runes into the very bones of the receiver.*

“The pain would be intolerable,” Bonner continued for the dragon. “Any breathing being would die of shock. So—” he waved a hand as though to say “obviously”—“the dead, or the undead, make the best candidates.”

Declan could understand Ester’s snarl of disgust at these words, but there was more there, too. Something that had sent a shiver up his spine.

Carved into bone?

“Wait... Like the bone charms?”

The way Bonner and Ryn looked at him, then—half-impressed and half-resigned—told Declan he had thought right.

The bone charms. Sehranya’s greatest tool of expansion. He had only ever seen one—hanging from a leather thong around the neck of a dead captain of Viridian’s Vigil—but even that brief sight of the thing had left an impression he doubted he’d ever forget. A small loop of bone—like the cross section of a femur or vertebrae—it had been notably marked with etched script that had, briefly, reminded him of the runes Bonner was only just begun to teach him. *These* symbols, though, had been something other than the careful, flowing chirography of the mage’s magic. They had been... crueler, somehow, colder, as though Declan—though unable to read them—could see a bloody and terrible story etched into the harsh edges of the emblems.

It didn’t help that a minute later that dead captain had risen as a wight to ambush them all, along with every other member of the Vigil unit who had lain slain around him.

“Despite my jesting, Declan, you *do* have an eye for all this, don’t you?” Bonner was studying him almost-proudly. “Yes. Sehranya’s charms *are* a form of imbuelement. Very likely the first form, in fact. The drey came after, and even then the strengthened among them were few and far between. It is alarming, in fact, that everyone one of the creatures we have thus-far come across appears to have been pervade with such weaves.”

Sehranya has been busy, these 700 years... Ryn muttered from the old man’s side.

Bonner nodded, looking—just for a moment—much older than his sixty- or seventy-year-old appearance gave the impression of. “Yes, she has indeed...”

There was a pause as all of them felt the weight of their flight—and fight—again, but Ester was fortunately in no apparent mood for wallowing.

“Then what is *Declan* doing, Father?” she pressed, crossing her arms impatiently. “You’ve not explained anything yet!”

“Oh!” Bonner regained his enthusiasm immediately, bouncing back from the momentary soberness in a blink. “No, I suppose I haven’t!” He looked to Declan “I’m not surprised to find you have a talent for corpomancy, boy. You’ll recall the stories of your forefather, I gather?”

“I do,” Declan answer. “They’re the reason I’ve been trying so hard to master this.”

“As well you should.” Bonner pointed at the center of Declan’s chest, just inside of where the firestone lay in his breast pocket. “Suffusion is the *body* half of corpomancy. The drawing of power from one’s own magic. The environment, too, at later levels. It is not a constant thing like imbuement—at least not initially—but the goal *is* to break one’s physical limits, and ultimately so consistently that the end result is not so different.”

“Like you do,” Declan said, stating it as a fact rather than a question.

Bonner grinned. “Yes, like I do. What gave it away?”

Declan snorted. “What didn’t? You tearing half a boulder out of the stalagmites in the caverns was a pretty blatant example.”

Ryn and Ester both snorted at that, earning themselves a glare from the old man.

“Yes, well...” he slowly looked back to Declan. “*That* was certainly not an illustration of my regular ability. It required additional magic poured into my weaves. Still, it *is* an example of suffusion, to be sure.”

Declan couldn’t help himself, at these words.

“Meaning *that’s* what I’ll be able to do one day?”

Bonner scoffed. “Boy, you should know by now that I specialize in verdamancy and auramancy—earth magics and healing. I am *not* a battle mage, despite whatever you might think to the contrary. No...” He narrowed his eyes at Declan. “You... What *you* should be able to do one day will very likely make tossing a hunk of rock about pale in comparison.”

It was Herst’s one talent in magic, Ryn offered up as Declan stared at Bonner. Not so great of one, even, but still enough to compliment his natural ability with the blade. After he accepted my gifts, his potential for body magics grew alongside his talent for pyromancy and physical prowess. You have the latter of those already, and it’s obvious you’re on the path of eventually mastering fire. Ryn grinned. At the speed you learn, I’d say it won’t be too long before you’ll be able to jump off my back mid-flight, like he once did.

“*What?*” Declan and Ester demanded together, earning a laugh from the dragon.

Oh yes. Not from too far up, of course. There are limits to even magic, as I keep telling you. But he could always make an entrance when he really wanted to. Never did learn to fly, though... Ryn trailed off distractedly at that.

“I’m sorry,” Declan said with shake of his head. “Fly? Herst wanted to *fly*?”

“And he might have, if he’d had a knack for aeromancy!” Bonner said with his own chuckle. “That was more his sister’s speciality, though, and she never had much of a taste for the skies. Wouldn’t even take to dragon-back, from what I recall.”

No she didn’t... Ryn confirmed, his thoughts still obviously elsewhere.

Declan and Ester gaped at the pair of them, then at each other, then at the mage and dragon again.

“I’m sorry, let me be clearer,” Declan eventually got out, bringing a fist up to feign a cough to clear his throat.

Then he looked right at Bonner, and yelled loud enough for the words to echo eerily through the dim light of the trees all around them.

“*Herst wanted to FLY?!*”

“Yes! *Yes!*” Bonner shouted back, covering his ears reflexively as Ester laughed at Declan’s side. “Is it so strange a desire?!”

Declan had to admit that was a good question.

“I mean... I suppose not? It’s just...” He shook his head. “How is that even possible?”

Bonner squinted at him for a moment longer. Then—when he seemed sure he wasn’t about to be bellowed at again—he dropped his hands with a sigh.

“There is an enormous amount of energy in living things, boy. There were theories by the court mathematicians of my day that the human body possessed enough energy to level of city—or more—if it could

be harnessed and unleashed all at once. This, in fact, is the very principle behind corpomancy.” Bonner waved a hand at Declan’s chest again. “Harnessing every ounce of one’s potential, then going beyond even that. Eventually, as I’ve said, this is to be done efficiently. At the beginning, though—*especially* if a study of the art is taken without proper supervision—” the old man raised an eyebrow at him “—it a constant drain on one’s system *despite* all that untapped energy.”

Declan frowned at him. “Meaning what, exactly?”

In answer, Bonner smiled.

The he reached out, put a single finger over Declan’s heart, and pushed.

Declan gasped as what felt like restrained lightning coursed its way outward from the point the old man had touched. He staggered back, not even hearing Ester’s shout of alarm as she made to follow him, only to be restrained by Ryn taking her gently by the arm. Declan would have yelled, would have cursed by the Mother and Her Graces, but the sensation was all-encompassing, all-consuming. It wasn’t painful, per se, but it *was* the single most uncomfortable feeling he had ever experienced in his life. He was reminded in flashes of the wash of agony that had been his drenching by the drey blood that had left most of his upper body scarred, and for a second he wanted to wretch, a combination of the alien distress and unpleasant memories making him nauseous as the lightning spread outward. In a few seconds it was out of his chest, and while he could breathe easier he still had to grit his teeth while it crawled down his legs and arms. The sensation reached his knees, and he collapsed, first onto all fours, then onto one side as his elbows too gave way. Finally he could yell, and he did so, rolling onto his back as it continued to spread outward.

Then it reached the tips of his fingers and toes, and vanished.

For a long moment Declan didn’t move, breathing hard and staring up at the dim black-and-grey of the Vyr’esh’s canopy high above his head. Eventually, when he was *sure* the horrid feeling was gone for good, he scrambled to roll over and shoved himself to his feet.

“What the *hell* was that, Bonner?!” he snarled at the mage, who hadn’t lost his now-infuriating smile.

“You tell me,” the man smiled, crossing his arms and cocking his bald head to one side. “How do you feel?”

Declan paused at that. He wasn’t willing to stop glaring, but he took an account of himself in silence as Ryn, beside Bonner, let go of Ester again.

It was strange, he realized. He felt... good. *Very* good. Better certainly than he had since the slaying of the tunneler, but also more than that.

If he had to guess, Declan thought his body felt better than it ever had in his entire damn life.

“What did you do?” he breathed, finally looked away from Bonner as he lifted an arm to clench and unclench his fingers before his eyes. He could tell, even with that small movement. Long years with a hilt in hand told him his grip—already impressive even for his size—was stronger than before. *Everything* felt stronger than before.

“Nothing, really,” the mage answered with a chuckle. “Are you still channeling your suffusion?”

Declan blinked at that, then focused inward. To his surprise he was indeed still holding on his weave of strength, and having an easier time of it than ever before. If he’d lost hold of the spell during whatever episode Bonner had just put him through, he seemed to have instinctively grasped it again.

“What in Her Graces...?” he muttered, staring at the ground as he continued to inwardly study the flow of power along his arms and legs.

At least until Ester growled demand brought him back again.

“Father! *Explain!*”

Declan looked up to find Bonner wincing under the seething stare his daughter was treating him to.

“Genuinely!” the mage insisted. “I hardly did anything! I just topped him off, that’s all!”

Declan frowned, not following. “Topped me off?”

If I had to guess—Ryn sounded like he was trying not to laugh as Ester stalked towards her father, bow held up like she might beat the man with it—*what I think Bonner means to say is that he has replenished your reserves Declan. The energy and spirit you’d depleted. He seems to have filled them again.*

Declan’s jaw dropped.

“You can *do that!*!” he exclaimed, whirling on the mage again so fast his boots nearly slipped in the snow beneath his feet. “You could do that this whole time?! Then what have I been suffering for, after all our lessons?! Why not just replenish me so I wouldn’t be so spent?!”

“Would you *liked* to have gone through that experience every evening, boy?” Bonner asked with a smirk, having backpedaled just enough to be out of his daughter’s reach. “Having someone else’s magic coursing through your veins? It doesn’t get any easier, either. You *don’t* acclimate to such a feeling.”

“Ah,” Declan stood up straight again, understanding. “No, I suppose I wouldn’t.”

Bonner snorted, and then his face softer a little.

“That’s not the *only* reason, though,” he said with a shrug, as though admitting something. “You *are* an exceptional pupil of the arts, Declan, but that has almost as much to do with your own drive as it does Ryndean’s gifts. You push yourself, push your body and mind, and it’s that strain, over and over and over again, which has lent itself to the breadth of your growth. I *could* have ‘topped you off’ every night, yes, but that wouldn’t be unlike healing you every time you finished sparring with Ester and Ryndean. Using magic to do what the body should be allowed to has its consequences. Such spellwork might have eased your aches and lessened your fatigue, but it would also have largely robbed you of the improvements all that hard work resulted in.” Bonner waved a hand at Declan’s chest again. “It’s the same for magic, for the ‘vessel’ that is your body. I know the stress our lessons have put on you, boy. Intimately so. And it is *for* that reason that I would not do what I just did except for in the most extreme circumstances.”

It clicked, then, and with a narrowing of his eyes Declan released his grasp on the ‘suffusion’ weave. It still slipped away easily enough—he had a long way to go before the spell was a natural part of his subconscious, he suspected—but its departure was different this time than it had been only minutes before. Where then he’d sagged and needed help to stay upright, now the weight that descended on his head, limbs, and shoulders was lesser, lighter. Again he squeezed his hands—both of them, this time—and discovered a sensation of weakness that felt more comparative to his previous strength than true fatigue.

In ‘topping him off’, Bonner had banished the exhaustion of the previous days, and allowed him to briefly experience the *true* benefit of the suffusion, of the weave layered over his own natural strength.

“I see you’ve put it together,” the mage said, and Declan looked up at him again in time to see the man give an approving nod. “Good. If that’s the case, you should be able to tell me: why didn’t you recover on your own?”

“Father, now is *not* the time for a lesson in spellcraft, I think,” Ester said through gritted teeth, but the old man ignored her. He was looking at Declan evenly, waiting for an answer.

An answer Declan actually thought he had.

“The weave was a constant drain,” he said. “The suffusion was consistently drawing from me, from my reserves.”

Bonner nodded curtly, and to the side Ryn gave a small sound of approval.

“Exactly. Well that, and your spell of warmth. You may be prodigal, boy, but you are still a neophyte when it comes to magic.”

Declan, at last, managed his own smile. “Not for much longer, I hope?”

Bonner smirked and rolled his eyes even as he turned away and started making into the woods again, their lesson apparently at an end. “Don’t start get cocky on me now! Ask me that again in 700 years or so!”

Declan laughed at loud, the sound feeling as alien among the trees as might have the trumpeting of a herald’s horn. Still, it felt good, and seemed to have a relaxing effect on Ryn and Ester, left to stand with them as the mage pressed on.

Infuriating as he is, the man is yet a genius, isn’t he? the dragon asked of them.

“That’s the worst part about it all,” Ester muttered, still sour despite looking somewhat better now that she knew Declan was on his own feet again, figuratively speaking. “Half-a-child, and yet...”

“And yet,” Declan agreed, deciding to take the lead and stepping forward after Bonner. “Can’t complain, though, can we? This must be the eleventh time at least he’s saved my neck at this point.”

No, we certainly can’t, the dragon chucked, moving to walk beside him as Ester hung back a little to call Orsik and Eyera to heel. *You couldn’t have a better mentor, Declan. I hope you realize that.*

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” Declan muttered, not looking at his friend as they navigated the thick roots of a heavy pine Bonner had vanished around. “I had a pretty damn good one, growing up.”

And he's very proud of you, Ryn said with a smile. *But he also knows where his shortcomings lay. Actually, he was pleased for that very reason, back in the pavilion.*

“Why is that?”

When you asked for instruction from the er'endeahn. You don't know it, but you're very nearly on the same path as your forefather was, in his training.

Declan's brow rose at that. “Herst? How do you mean?”

Ryn looked at him sidelong. *You do recall he was a prince of Viridian, don't you? Maybe not the crowned heir, but a child of Igoric al'Dyor all the same?*

Declan rolled his eyes as the sound of Orsik and Eyera's thumping footsteps came up from behind them. “Yes, I recall. What does that have to do with anything?”

I told you weeks ago, Ryn laughed dryly. *As a prince of Viridian, Herst was privy to the greatest masters the country had to offer. Them—*

“And others from beyond its borders,” Declan finished for him, remembering suddenly.

It had seemed little more than a passing comment in the greater conversation in which Ryn and Bonner had revealed the truth of his lineage to him at last, and he'd certainly thought nothing more of it at the time. Now, though, after having witnessed the mastery the dark elves had over their chosen craft in person, it made sense to Declan.

Ester, however, beat him to voicing the realization.

“Amherst al'Dyor was taught by the *er'endeahn*?!”

She came loping up on Ryn's right, riding Eyera confidently as Orsik slid into step beside Declan, who automatically ruffled the massive animal's closest ear fondly, earning himself a rumble of please that didn't pierce his momentary awe as Ryn continued.

By the best they had to offer, yes. The dragon was peering through the trees as he answered the question, likely looking to see where Bonner had disappeared to. *Them, and the wood elves as well. It wasn't so strange a practice, at the time. You have to recall this was before the Accord, before Sebranya. Humanity harbored and educated the few children of the elven races who had a knack for magic, and scholars were traded all the time to educate one another on what our peoples had independently earned of the world. Soldiers, too, were exchanged, though most frequently this was to mankind's benefit. Martial masters from the er'endeahn, trackers and archers from the er'endthyl.*

“Not sure what the wood elves could teach about archery that the *er'endeahn* couldn't,” Ester grumbled. “Alik and Tesied make my mother look like an amateur.”

Your mother was a member of the High Guard. Trained to protect the ebn'Vyr'en family from assault and assassination. Ryn shrugged. *She was not among the master hunters of the wood elves, who could pin a falling leaf through thick woods from a tenth of a mile away.*

Ester looked a little prouder at that, but she started to deny all the same.

“Maybe, but you should see what those brothers are capable of before you say anything to the contrary. It's like they were *built* for w—”

Declan, what's wrong?

Declan heard Ryn's concerned voice from a long way off, having stopped at the top of an embankment that led down to a frozen river across which Bonner's footprints could be seen in the snow. He'd reached out to place one hand onto the trunk of the closest tree, leaning into it for support as his sense of balance was thrown into chaos.

For the first time in a while, after all, the world before him had faded into layered images, Ryn, Ester, and the warg all nothing more than ghostly imprints beneath the flurry of memories that swam before him.

His mind had taken him to a brightly lit courtyard of sand and stone, the walls all about him distinctly of Virisian design. Above, the sky was clear save for a few scattered clouds, the sun reflecting brightly off the clean steel of the sword that flicked and thrummed before him in quick, clean patterns.

His target, however, might as well have been made of wind or smoke for all the opportunity Declan had of hitting him.

The figure was shirtless, a sheen of sweat making his black, scarred skin shine in the day. His long white hair—as long as Lysiat ay'ahSel, probably—was bound in tight braid down the back of his neck, and his pale eyes shone with concentration. His hands were behind his back, and for a moment Declan thought they might

have been lashed there until he saw the dark hilt and tip of a sheathed, black sword protruding from either side of him, and he realized the stranger was holding onto the scabbard of the weapon as a handicap.

It made the dark elf's movements all the more incredible.

Despite the speed and fluidity of his patterns, Declan's blade—*Herst's*, rather, he knew now—couldn't catch more than clear air as he tried again and again and again to score a single strike on the *er'endebrn*. The elf dipped and weaved and stepped both in and out of range as needed, upper body bending and twisting more like the dance of the boxers that sometimes held matches in the Alethan markets than a swordsman. Declan kept trying to up his pace, kept trying to up his speed, but the elf only seemed to expand the gap between the two of them with every passing moment, almost like he saw where the blows would be coming from before Declan even knew how he would strike. For nearly fifteen seconds the sparring continued like that—Declan not hearing Ryn and Ester climb the bank to rejoin him—before it ended so suddenly he could have blinked and missed it.

A slashing, horizontal blow of his sword, a duck and twist by the elf, and the heavy pommel of that still-sheathed blade catching Declan square in the gut from where it was still held behind his opponent's gut.

He only got a glimpse of the *er'endebrn's* face—white teeth grinning from with a cropped black beard and strikingly square jaw—before he double over and felt himself falling towards the sandy ground.

It was snow, though, that puffed up around him as he collapsed, the memories vanishing in time find himself just starting to tumble down the incline towards the riverbed.

Declan!

Ryn, with all his inhuman speed, reached him first, grabbing one arm before he really started to slip. Ester was right behind him, and had him by the collar of his filthy shirt before Declan himself could even begin to gather himself once more. Together the pair of them hauled him back up over the lip of the slope, pulling him all the way onto his feet.

Declan! Ryn repeated, alarmed. *What was that? What happened?*

"Are you alright?" Ester, too, was half-shouting in concern. "Are you unwell? I *knew* that old fraud would do something stupid! Topping-off my arse! You could have broken your—!"

"N-no!" Declan finally managed to stammer out, blinking away the last lingering images of the foreign recollections. "It's nothing! Nothing like that!" He gathered himself as the two of them went silent, taking a breath before looking at Ryn. "It was Herst. More of him. More of his... his memories."

Despite the months now that he'd spent with this knowledge—not to mention the numbers of time before he'd been struck by just such flashbacks—it still felt strange to speak of the phenomenon aloud.

Ryn hissed something quietly in his native tongue, eyes going wide for a second before he, too, found his voice.

What did you see? he asked at last.

"Training, I think," Declan said, testing his legs and finding them sturdy as—with crunch of scraping claws—Orsik and Eyera, too, rejoined them at the top of the bank. "Before the war, obviously. Before everything." He frowned, recalling what he'd see. "There was dark elf, there. I—Herst—was trying to hit him, but I couldn't. Bastard didn't even draw his sword. Just kept it behind his back the entire time..."

Ryn stared at him a moment more.

Then the dragon laughed.

I've heard that story, he said, letting go of Declan at last now that he'd regained his balance. *The very first day of Herst's mentorship. He'd had teachers before, of course—the best the royal aids could find—but none of them could keep up with your forefather for long. Igoric sent a request to the High Chancellor of Ysenden of the day, and a few months later Herst was suddenly the one getting put on his ass by his training partner, rather than the other way around.*

"It was... impressive," Declan had to admit. "He made it look like the *ay'abSels* could learn a thing or two from him."

Ryn grunted in ascent. *Like I said: we were a more closely knit world, back then. According to Herst, the High Chancellor sent a rising star of the their military. Likely a small price to pay for the ability to have the King of mankind owe the dark elves a favor, I think.*

Declan nodded, pondering this as he extracted himself from Ester, offering a word of thanks as he pulled his arm free gently of her hesitant fingers.

“Is *that* why he was so strong?” he asked, motioning as he did that they should continue moving. “Herst? I can see why you wanted to look for a better teacher for me in Aletha, if that was the case.”

Ryn gave him a mocking glare as they took the descent together, Orsik and Eyera happily leading the way now that they were following Bonner’s trail again. *Did you not just finish complimenting me on my prodigal instruction?* the dragon asked, feigning offense. *What need for a better teacher could there have been when you had a talking horse to yell instructions at you from a distance as you swung sticks at a tree?*

Ester—trailing the two closely like she was afraid Declan might topple again at a moment’s notice—sniggered, earning herself a glare from him.

“You know what I mean,” Declan grumbled at Ryn as they reached the icy edge of the river and began traversing it carefully, clawed feet and boots gaining purchase only in the layer of snow that covered it. “An instructor like that... Pretty sure they could turn any common soldier into a sword fit for a royal guard at the very least...”

Ryn nodded. *Fair enough, but the quality of one’s lessons only amounts to the potential of one’s growth, Declan, as Bonner said. You might have the greatest mentor of the age when it comes to your magical training, but you are the one who taps into those teachings. Your drive. Your need.*

“Your big head, if you get any more compliments today,” Ester chimed in, dipping around the pair nimbly as they reached the far edge and started ascending the steep embankment.

Declan laughed, but Ryn ignored her.

Herst was much the same. He, too, had Bonner’s teachings, though his natural resonance with magic was far less than yours until he accepted my gifts. He had far greater mentors in the art of the blade, too—as you’ve just seen. But it was his own perseverance to brought him to the pinnacle, Declan. Nothing less than that. Declan saw the white-gold eyes take him in sidelong again. *And it will be yours that does much the same, I think.*

Declan would have chuckled then, would have told the dragon he had enough pressure to chase his ancestor’s legend as it was without being compared directly to him, but the sound caught in his throat as they reached the top of the far bank. There, not very far from where they stood on the frozen ground, Bonner had seated himself on the protruding root a winter maple whose trunk was some twenty feet wide. He was kicking his feet and whistling a tune like a schoolboy at play, and the mischievous glint in his eye would have had Declan on edge had he not *immediately* seen what it was the old man was so happy about.

There, among the other gnarled fingers that made up the tree’s base, the dark mouth of a modest cave was well hidden by the terrain and excavated dirt that had been mounded up around it, the layer of snow that helped to camouflage it saying clearly that this was not a hole dug by Bonner himself.

Declan groaned, stopping short even as Ester jogged quickly to catch up to Orsik and Eyera, who were trotting towards the cave happily enough. At his side, Ryn smiled with a knowing nod, patting him consolingly on the back.

If it makes you feel better, this bear seems to be hibernating, so we’re not likely to have to fish for it.

Declan sighed, moving forward again with the dragon. “Heartwarming. And here was afraid I’d have to thaw the river to earn our keep again.”

“No need, no need!” Bonner was grinning as they approached, apparently overhearing. “Carro didn’t so much as budge when the three of us made ourselves at home.” He gestured to Ester and Eyera, who were already vanishing down the hole without a second’s hesitation. “And there’s ample room for us, it’s been dug out to accommodate his *substantial* weight and height. I don’t foresee him causing any trouble for anyone.”

“Of course you’ve named him.” Declan had to stop himself rolling his eyes as he watched Orsik paw a little less surely at the lip of the cave’s descent before deciding it was safe to brave. “And I’m assuming that all means I don’t want to know just how big *this one* is, do I?”

Bonner shrugged before—still smiling—he shoved himself off his root to drop down after his daughter and the warg. “Come and see for yourself. Just don’t be too loud when you do. Wouldn’t want anyone getting crushed by a stray paw, would we?”

Declan only grumbled after the mage, earning another laugh from Ryn as the dragon made to follow Bonner underground.

Before he could take a step downward, though, Declan held him up with a hand on his scaled arm.

“Ryn...” he started hesitantly. “Just out of curiosity... Do you recall the name of the elf? The one who trained Amherst?”

Ryn treated him to a questioning look.

“It’s just... It’s on the tip of my tongue,” Declan explained awkwardly. “Like Herst knew it. Like I should, too. It’s going to bother me, I can tell.”

Ryn nodded at that, understanding. *The curse of two minds.* He snorted dryly. *Or part of it at least. Let me think...* The dragon frowned, concentrating, his serpentine head tilting up a little so the misting of his exhalation was like dragon’s breath aimed at the canopy high above them. *Cirius?* he muttered, clearly unsure. *Cirian? No...* His frowned deepened.

Then, all at once, his expression cleared, and he smiled down at Declan.

Ciriak! he exclaimed in success. *Herst call him Ciriak.*