

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Fail me again, and suffer the consequences. I would remind you not to forget that death need be no release from punishment, in my presence...”

• - The Endless Queen

Gonin Whist smiled wryly as Bonner Fehn’s chaotic spell came to an end. He watched the mage drop his arms and stagger, one foot actually splashing into the icy flow of the river before the one of King’s blood darted from his place by the shifted dragon to catch the old man by the elbow, drawing him back. Satisfied, Gonin dismissed his scrying weave with a sweep of one hand, obliterating the cycling runes of sight and transportation scrawled into the ground he knelt on, giving himself a second or two to allow a return of his awareness to his own body.

When he’d regained his presence of mind, Gonin rose to his feet, his lank, grey hair and the fur lining of his robes shifting slightly in the chill winter breeze as he tilted his head to the heavens above.

He stood in the broad patch of light he’d made for himself by felling one of the giant titans of the Vyr’esh. The base of its trunk eaten away by searing flames, the great evergreen had come down with a *crash* that had sent snow and ice showering from the canopy above to the ground, but Gonin had estimated himself more than far away enough from his intended prey that he could get away with it. He’d needed a clean line of sight to the sky, after all, as well as a cleared patch of ground in which to etch the runes, and in the end it had been well worth the trouble.

He’d found them again.

The loss of the wights was a negligible thing. Gonin and his Queen had long since made sure there were more where they’d come from, and the draugr had felled far more of the elven soldiers than their own permanent casualties. What was more, the undead currently being swept down the river would likely get tangled up in the rapids and frozen waterfall a mile or so upstream, allowing for their general retrieval. Even had that *not* been the case, the sacrifice of the wights would have been worth it.

He had found them.

The Queen’s fury had been a terrible thing when the one of King’s blood had felled her “wurm”, as she’d called it. They hadn’t even been in communication when Gonin had felt the rage through the crystal speaker’s charm still hanging from his neck. Worse, the bitch elf who had been accompanying the man had apparently dragged him out of the mountains before reinforcements could be sent to finish off the job, removing them from the Queen’s realm and the eye she’d been able to keep upon them. Gonin suspected the earth itself must have shook when *that* escape had happened, as he’d felt his master’s seething ire even in the simple command she’d given him, which had drawn him back from Viridian and into the icy forests of Eserysh.

And now, he had succeeded.

They would be heading to Ysenden, he knew. The livery of the soldiers who’d been escorting the four companions and their beasts had promised as much, as well as the presence of the twin spear-wielders and their elder sibling the Queen had described as having been among the elves who’d escaped the Mother’s Tears alive. Gonin smiled again as he considered the possibilities this offered him and his master. The one of King’s blood likely expected to find security in the city of the *er’endehn*, safety. He likely expected a haven within which he’d be able to grow stronger, he, the dragon, the half-elf, and that thrice-damned Bonner Fehn together. There might have been some truth to that, at one time.

“No longer, though, you foolish little man,” Gonin said with a satisfied grin up at the sun.

Then, with a thought, he called to his mount, summoning it to him from the skies as he began to plan.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Grief is a thing mankind might assume lacking among the elves, particularly the stoic brethren of the er'endehn. Humanity—in suffering loss—tends to break, if even only temporarily. We weep. We scream. We fall asleep clutching at ourselves, wishing only for a way to fill the void that has suddenly appeared within us at the loss of our loved one. By comparison, the most emotion one will sometimes see from an elf in similar circumstances is a stillness, a silence of voice of body alike. They may seem as cold as stone, unwilling to even shed a tear for the gone.

Do not be fooled. Consider—instead—that when one lives for a thousand years as man might live for fifty, loss forms such a great part of one's life that it becomes imperative to shield one's self from its claws, lest one be lost to the depths of mounting grief as the centuries wear on...

- - *Disparities of Race in Modern Society*, by Seckle Gelt,
• c. 290p.f.

“Erraven,” Syr’esh was saying darkly, ignoring the sergeant who was in the process of bandaging the shallow lacerations that bled down the colonel’s left shoulder where a wight’s claws had torn through the leathers of his armor. Instead, he merely pointed at a spot on the map being held up for him by two of his surviving higher officers as he repeated himself. “Erraven.”

Declan, following the colonel’s finger, could only agree.

It was a miracle the map had survived. Most of the soldiers tasked with carrying the tents and gear had either abandoned the weight at the call for retreat, or died before they’d had a chance to. After the morning they’d all had, though, Declan thought they were owed a little good fortune.

Erraven. The runes of the ancient city—as explained by the elders of the Colonel’s remaining inner circle and translated by Ester—had apparently been no more than ten miles west of them when they’d been attacked. They had all—Declan, Ryn, Ester, and even the ay’ahSels—been pulled into this emergency meeting the moment they’d absconded deep enough back into the woods for the dragon to announce them free of pursuers. For half an hour now they’d been debating what had happened, how it was they had come to be ambushed. Declan had been pleased to discover that Ryn and Ester both had made the same realization he had over the course of the fight, as had one or two of the older officers. A horde of undead—like that which had been used by Sehranya seven hundred years ago to attack first Eserysh, then the Reaches—was one thing to expose to the elements and dangers of the frozen woodlands. The scattered wights had been another.

Sehranya had a foothold, it had been agreed, and as soon as this had been decided the map had been called for, and the likeliest sight of such a bastion identified almost immediately.

Are we sure the city still stands? Ryn asked of the elves, the reptilian features of his *rb’em* looking up from the meticulous emblem that was Erraven on the map. *It would have been abandoned for centuries now, would it not?*

“*It stands,*” was all Declan understood of the Colonel’s response before having to bend down so Ester could translate into his ear. “*Our kind approach nothing without seeking perfection. That includes our homes. The ancient cities—Erraven, Syr’bend, ys’Vaal, and the rest—may be empty, but they are not absent.*”

"We use them, on occasion." Major r'Rehl offered in addition, wincing slightly as speaking obviously strained the wound along the side of her neck that was bleeding through its bandages. *"As outposts on patrol. They may be far gone from the metropolises they once were, but their walls are sturdy and a far cry better than the trees at blocking the wind and snow in winter."*

Ryn nodded in understanding. *Then I agree with the Colonel. Erraven has been claimed by the Endless Queen, or more likely whatever subordinate it is she's sent to establish a stronghold in your lands. It is very possible the city is being used as a garrison.*

"Then what do we do?" Declan asked as the elves around him all exchanged grim looks. "Is dealing with it an option as we are now?"

Not on our own, no, Ryn said with a shake of his head as Ester turned Declan's question for the benefit of the *er'endebrn*. *I might be able to torch it from the sky, but there's no telling what could be waiting for me approaching the city. There might be drey, or worse.*

"Worse than the winged?" Major y'Rehl sounded like she were attempting to come off with her usual dubiousness, but her doubtful expression no longer held the same fervor it might have even earlier that morning.

Ryn nodded. *Liche, perhaps. Or a true necromancer, like the one we crossed paths with in Viridian. Some higher intelligence of Sebranya's ilk has a hand in this. We know that much. Something had to weave the Purpose into those wights, and regardless of what they are I would be hesitant to engage them on my own. Perhaps if Bonner wasn't out of commission...*

Collectively, every head in the meeting turned together. While they had secluded themselves from the rest of the recovering soldiers that had survived the assault, Bonner had immediately excused himself from the gathering in favor of settling into the nook of a nearby tree before pulling his hood up and searing a rune of warmth into the wood at his back. He was asleep now, they could all tell, Orsik and Eyer curled up protectively on either side of him, and no one—not even the elves with their minimal understanding of magic—spoke a word of protest at the sight. Between the combat and his weave of destruction which had freed them of the pursuit of the wights, the mage had been largely spent already, but he'd passed their march further into the Vyr'esh hurrying from one injury to another, stopping bleeding, sealing wounds, and getting soldiers being dragged along by their comrades back on their own feet. By the time Ryn had called the halt, Bonner's complexion had been pallid, and Declan doubted the man would wake until the next morning at the earliest if no one roused him.

"Colonel...I would ask that you bring Master Ryndean and his companions into your confidence."

Declan almost missed Ester's translation of the words, taken aback as he was by the fact that it was *Lysiat* who had spoken. For the most part, the *ay'ahSels* had stayed silent throughout the meeting, voicing their thoughts only when asked for by *Syr'esh* or one of the other higher ups, apparently all too aware of the fact that they had been included more due to their growing bond with Declan and the others than any merit of status or rank. It was strange, therefore, for the elf to speak so out of turn, and y'Rehl was only one of several faces to tense in disapproval at her words.

The Colonel himself, however, was not among them.

Syr'esh was instead looking at *Lysiat* ponderously while he pulled his shirt back up over his now-bandaged shoulder as the attending sergeant stepped away. The man looked to be considering something, and Declan, Ryn, and Ester all had the sense to wait for him to speak before voicing their curiosity.

Bring them into his confidence about what?

"Master Ryndean..." *Syr'esh* finally looked away from *Lysiat* to Ryn, seeming—for once—just the slightest bit hesitant. *"The situation regarding Erraven is... erm... further complicated by other factors, I'm afraid."*

Oh? Ryn raised an eyebrow. *More complicated than the possibility of an army of draugr, drey, and necromancers within two day's march of Ysenden?*

“Indeed,” Syr’esh admitted with a dry smile, waving off the frowns of his officers as he continued. *“You are aware by now, I assume, of the... trouble our city has been facing of late? I had informed Master yr’Essel of it before your return to us.”*

“More like he dragged it out of us,” y’Rehl rasped, earning herself a sharp look from the Colonel, as well as more subtly from each of the ay’ahSel siblings.

We are aware of the insurrection, yes. Ryn nodded, ignoring the Major. *The timing of it all is suspicious, to be sure, but what does that have to do with Erraven specifically?*

“Much and more, most unfortunately. These rebellions have a distinctive identifier, you see: they are driven by bloodline. Both old and new.”

“The bloodline of the old cities?” It was Ester who asked the question, voicing Declan’s own suspicion, though he’d only barely understood her.

“Indeed.” It was the Colonel’s turn to nod at the half-elf before looking to Ryn again. *“You have lived long enough I believe, Master Ryndean. I assume you know the tumultuous history of the er’endehn?”*

I and all of us here, Ryn confirmed, crossing his arms and narrowing his white-gold eyes impatiently. *Is there a point to this, Colonel? I’d not have taken you for a man who dances around a subject...*

Syr’esh took the calling-out to heart, clearing his throat before his own gaze sharpened. *“Ahem... Indeed. You are correct. My apologies. I am not typically in the habit of sharing information outside my officers, let alone outside my own race.”* He gathered himself for a moment, frowning between Ryn, Declan, and Ester briefly, but when he continued it was in a surer tone. *“Of the old states, Erraven and Ys’vaal held the greatest power outside of Ysenden, along with Syr’hend, where my own parents fled from. Unsurprisingly, it is some of the old residents of those cities and their descendants who have been making the greatest trouble for our High Chancellor and his council, these last months. Of those three, however, the blood of Erraven had been the greatest threat, even making some direct assaults on the Chancellor himself, or at least attempting to. As close as it is to Ysenden, a much larger portion of the city’s population managed to make it to safety compared to the others, whose ruins are further south of us, closer to the mountains Sebranya descended from. As a result, even only the portion of Erraven’s blood who count themselves among the dissenters had not been of insignificant number.”*

“Had’ been the greatest threat?” Declan repeated, not having missed the tense. *“Had not’ been of insignificant number? You speak in the past tense, Colonel. What happened?”*

Syr’esh grimaced slightly once Ester finished translating for him. *“It was an ugly business. Said bluntly: the High Chancellor and our Lord Commander had them and their families largely corralled several months ago... and exiled.”*

Declan felt a shiver he didn’t like crawl up his spine at these words, and it took him a moment to place where the fear had come from. As Ester’s mouth dropped open beside him and Ryn dragged a palm across his face with a groan, however, he figured it out. The dark elves could be cold, yes, but he’d not judged them to be cruel. Winter might not have been in full bloom a few months ago, but it would have been coming, and he couldn’t imagine the Ysenden military driving whole families—including at least *some* children, he had to assume—from the city if they thought it meant death at the hands of the elements, or worse.

No... If they had been exiled from the safety of the walls, it would have been because they had a place to go.

The blood of Erraven, Declan repeated to himself with a chill, realizing what this meant.

They would have made for the city, Ryn spoke for them all, sounding grim. *They would have made for the ruins of Erraven.*

Syr’esh nodded slowly. *“And they did. It was confirmed, long before we—”* he gestured to himself and the other dark elves *“—set out from the city on the word of our scouts that a winged—a ‘drey’, as you say—had been sighted circling the southern edge of the Vyr’esh.”*

They would have settled in the ruins. Likely with the intent of starting over. Ryn’s expression was darkening by the second. *Few weapons between them, I assume, and fewer intact defenses.*

“They would have been sitting ducks,” Ester breathed, she too having clearly kept up with the dragon’s train of thought.

“The clothes.”

All of them, even the elves, turned to look at Declan as he spoke through grinding teeth.

What was that? Ryn asked him.

“The clothes,” Declan repeated, feeling something like an angry nausea welling up inside him. “The rags and the like some—*most*—of the wights were wearing. The only armor was on the few soldiers we’d already lost before we realized what was happening.” He stared straight ahead, feeling like he could have lit the bark of the tree he was glaring at aflame if he could weave rage into fire. “That’s where the rest of them came from. The rest of the draugr.”

“The rebels...” Ester groaned, looking suddenly a little sick. “They were the rebels...”

Despite his own fury, Declan managed to lift a hand to the half-elf’s upper back to comfort her as she bent forward slightly, clearly feeling ill. Ryn translated for them, and by the lack of surprise on Syr’esh’s face—though some of the other officers looked distinctly more alarmed—it was clear the Colonel, at the very least, had already come to the same conclusion.

“A thousand souls,” he said quietly. *“More since, I’ve no doubt, assuming any other rebels faced the same punishment...”*

“We’ve been feeding them to the horde?” It was Aliek’s turn to speak out of place, though no one looked disapproving this time, too busy were they trying to control their own emotions. *“Spirits save us...”*

There was a long, tense moment of silence after that, the only sounds coming from the wind above them and the groans and movement of soldiers through the trees just south of them.

“So what do we do?” Declan asked at last, feeling now was *not* the moment to reflect. “If we can’t make an assault ourselves, we ask for assistance, right? Assuming there will be an assault?”

Syr’esh nodded slowly after Ester translated. *“Indeed. The Chancellor will not abide this news. He’ll want Erraven cleansed, and as quickly as possible.”*

“We need to stop the exiling as well,” Lysiat said quietly. *“Every soul cast from the city is one more for Sebranya to claim, clearly.”*

Another nod, this time from every head that formed the circle.

“So... What do we do?” Declan asked again.

This time, Syr’esh’s eyes were hard when he answered.

“We continue on to Ysenden. We continue on to Ysenden with all haste.”

If Declan had any lingering doubts regarding the fortitude of the dark elves, they were dispelled in the following hours. Despite their pains, despite their wounds and their fatigue and the fresh memories of seeing their kin so brutally slain, when the Colonel’s command to march was announced, not a voice rose up in protest. Ninety-three. That was how many had had survived the ambush, according to Ryn. Ninety-three opportunities to lash out in anger or fear or exhaustion.

And not one said so much as a word.

The going was slower than any of them would have liked, but steady. It had been made clear they would be marching with little rest, so they pushed only as fast as was prudent. The plodding pace lent itself—not for

the first time—to Declan’s appreciation of Orsik and Eyera among their company. The warg stayed closer at hand as they resumed the trek north, ears flat and noses always dipping this way and that as they sniffed at the air. Orsik had only barely been further patched up by Bonner before the mage had collapsed, but the male made no complaint as they walked, the blood that matted his sides having congealed and frozen into his fur to seal his wounds enough to move. The old man himself rode Eyera with Ester, having barely been roused, and had promptly fallen asleep again as soon as he’d settled in behind his daughter to wrap his arms about her waist and rest a bearded cheek on her upper back. Declan knew his worries were baseless—Bonner yr’Essel was about as unbreakable as Ryn was—but seeing the old man brought low like this dragged up feelings of concern, and not *just* for his health.

With Bonner incapacitated, Declan was suddenly the only “mage”—if he could yet call himself that—left to defend their sorry group in case of another attack...

Then again... Where that realization would once have been a stressful pressure, Declan had held onto his newfound confidence. He knew, now, what he was capable of, or at least what he was limited to being capable of in the moment. No longer did he feel defenseless, vulnerable. No longer did he question his value among their little party. For too long had he felt like the weak link among his comrades, felt surpassed even by Orsik and Eyera, who could at least down prey large enough to feed them all if needed. No. After weeks—*months*, actually—of training, Declan had finally had his eyes opened to the possibilities of the future.

For the time being, though, those eyes were fixed on the woods around them as what was left of the once-proud elven unit moved, and he limited any further training to silently working on his corpomancy, drawing and retracting the weaves of strength into and out of his body with deliberate, practiced care.

The sun of the morning, occasionally sweeping across them through the rare break in the canopy above, eventually gave way to a dimmer afternoon, and before too long the limited light by which they traveled was fading. The elves pressed on into the closing dark, and Declan knew they would keep going long after his own human vision failed him. Still, there would be a limit to how far they could go before it became dangerous. As the shadows deepened around them, he had a thought, and he started to scour the ground, hoping to find what he was looking for in time.

As though the Mother herself had blessed him with luck, it wasn’t more than a minute before his searching was rewarded.

Falling back from the others for a moment, Declan crouched down at the foot of a fairly young spruce, grateful for the spell of warmth that emanated from the firestone hanging once again from around his neck. After a moment’s study, he took hold of the cold, rough surface of one of the two head-sized chunks of what was likely granite half-embedded into the ground among the tree’s roots. He cursed as he discovered that the stone wouldn’t move even when he suffused himself with as much magic as he could put into his limbs, and he was about pour heat into the frozen earth to soften it when a shadow came up to lean over him from behind.

What are you doing? Ryn asked curiously.

“Perfect timing,” Declan answered with a grin, pointing at the rocks. “Haul these out for me and you’ll see.”

Ryn’s inhuman strength proved a greater enemy to the frigid ground than it could resist, because the granite came out with a few hearty tugs of the dragon’s clawed hands. Once loose, Declan took one of rocks, leaving the other in his friend’s arms for the time being, and focused on it even as the two of them hurried to catch back up to the rest of the march.

By the time they’d rejoined the others—Ester, the ay’ahSels, and even Orsik and Eyera having turned to watch their jogging return curiously—Declan had poured enough magic into the granite to have it blazing with heat and light.

“Here,” he told Ryn, trading him the newly-formed firestone for the other still-dim rock. “There’s not so many of us scattered about any more. If you and I take these to the front of the line, we might be able to keep on for a while.”

Ryn raised an eyebrow at the sizable hunk of glowing granite he'd taken hold of without so much as wincing, his progenitor's blood having resonated with the pyromancy immediately. *That's a good thought, Declan, but you know I can't maintain your human weaves for too long before they—*

"I know," Declan said with a nod, already focusing on his own stone. "We can trade off whenever yours starts to dim."

Ryn, seeming satisfied with this suggestion, nodded as Ester sighed with a resigned sort of envy above them and Lysiat, Aliek, and Tesied all looked on in awe, along with every soldier in the nearby vicinity. A few minutes later, Declan was atop Orsik and pressing towards the front of the march, Ryn on foot right behind him. The warmth and light of the large firestones they held high—Declan's resting on one shoulder—drew a mix of murmurs and mutterings as they passed, but none of the soldiers raised any real question or alarm. Even once they reached Syr'esh and his officers they were greeted with nothing more than a few glares here and there, but with the Colonel's almost grateful permission, Declan and Ryn took their places a few body-lengths away from each other to lead the way.

With the firestones offering just enough illumination to guide their path, it was well after midnight before Syr'esh finally called for a rest, and even then only out of concern for the state of his soldiers. Everyone—Declan and Ryn included—was more than happy with the respite, and within a few minutes the majority of the *er'endebrn* had huddled up into groups of fours and five to share warmth as they slept. Ryn offered to watch till dawn if someone would be willing to tolerate his hawk's form on their shoulder the next day, and after Declan had agreed, even y'Rhel thanked the dragon before turning in.

The next morning, Declan awoke to the ugly sound of something heavier than snow striking the canopy above them. Blinking away a fatigue that had only been mildly lifted by a half-night of rest, he pushed himself unsteadily up from where he'd settled down between Orsik and Eyera with Ester and the still-largely-unconscious Bonner. A couple runes had kept them all warm enough, but the minimal heat of the channeling scripts was of little comfort when something hard bounced off Declan's leather-clad thigh to skitter off across the ground.

"Well that's just great," he muttered, eyeing the thumbnail-sized ball of hail as several other similar examples managed to make it through the branches and leaves above them to pelt ground and bodies alike.

The only advantage to the weather was that no one had too much trouble rousing themselves when the officers started shouting that it was time to break camp. Even Bonner finally stirred from his fatigue, giving Declan and Ester a weak smile before gratefully accepting to sleep more on Eyera's back behind his daughter. By the time they were up and ready to move, Ryn had returned to them looking haggard, and, as promised, quickly took to his own rest on Declan's shoulder after strapping his sword to Orsik's harness and shifting to his—mercifully *much* lighter—hawk's form.

After a cold meal that consisted mostly of dried military rations, it was in a frozen, uncomfortable silence that the group started to move again, making their way ever northward as the barely-visible dawn slowly brightened the sky through the trees. Not even the ay'ahSels talked among themselves as they plodded along under the cruel pelting of the hail, and Declan and Ester only exchanged a few bare words to alternately check on Bonner and Ryn respectively, preferring instead to keep their eyes on the forest around them or the often treacherous ground. Too many times in the last fortnight had Declan caught the toe of a boot on a stone or root hidden beneath the shallow snow, and—though he thought his companions might have welcomed a laugh at his expense given the dismal atmosphere—he had *no* desire whatsoever to suffer soaked pants and fur, even if he *had* gotten plenty of practice at drying his own clothes of late.

Fortunately for everyone's spirits, however, it was little before noon when Bonner finally woke up in truth.

"Well... If this isn't the most miserable lot of long faces I've ever seen in my life."

With a warming leap of his heart Declan turned just in time to find the old man swing a leg off Eyera to slide to the forest floor even as the warg kept on moving. Bonner didn't miss so much as a step as he landed,

and was walking in line with Declan and the ay'ahSels at once, stretching and looking around with a curious sort of air.

"How are you feeling?" Declan asked him. "That spell at the Lyons was... something else."

"In elvish. In elvish, Declan."

Declan started and turned to see Lysiat, Aliek, and Tesied all staring between him and Bonner with wide eyes, the commander having been the one to berate him. Apparently the three of them were about as eager to speak to the mage as he was, though the awe in their eyes spoke to a different sort of interest.

The river, after all, would have been the first time they had seen Bonner in something closer to his element.

Wait until they realize fire magic isn't his forte, Declan thought, smiling to himself.

"Yes, in elvish, Declan!" Bonner joined in teasingly, speaking slowly and simply so he could follow. *"I feel fine. Sore. But fine."*

"That magic, Master yr'Essel!" Tesied hissed like he'd been holding back for a day now to ask. *"What was...?"*

The rest of the elf's words were lost to Declan, sadly, but fortunately Bonner had his back.

"Slowly, Sergeant," the mage said, holding up a flat palm to tell Tesied to ease up. *"Declan does not speak well. Slowly."*

Tesied looked torn, like his desire to shower Bonner with questions was battling the man's request to be more considerate, but Lysiat beat him to the punch.

"The magic, Master yr'Essel," she repeated evenly in her brother's place, raising her hands to sign in the soldier's tongue in an effort to help Declan follow along. *"Was it dark magic?"*

Declan was so proud of the translation he'd managed for himself—using the signals he and the commander had never stopped practicing—that he almost missed how random a question this seemed.

Bonner, though, sighed almost like he had been expecting it.

"No, Commander." He answered with a shake of his head. *"Not dark magic."*

Lysiat frowned. *"But...dangerous. It was dangerous magic."*

This seemed to be more of a statement than anything, which had Declan confused until Bonner groaned in exasperation.

"What I'm going to have to do to scrub these poor souls of their misconceptions," he muttered in common before switching to elvish to address Lysiat again. *"Dangerous, yes. All magic is dangerous. But most magic is also...not dangerous."* Bonner frowned at his poor attempt to explain, giving Declan a disgruntled look and speaking to him directly. "This is your fault, you know. If you'd learned elvish growing up, we wouldn't be stuck communicating like dullards."

Declan snorted, pleased to see the man's fire returning. "Blame Ryn, then. Of anyone that was a part of my life back then, he's the only one who might have managed it."

"Fair point," Bonner grumbled in answer, green eyes shifting from Declan to the great black bird perched on his shoulder, beak and head tucked under one wing. For a second he looked to consider the sleeping dragon.

Then, with a wicked grin, he brought up a finger, clearly ready to deliver an aggressive poke.

"Father, I would remind you that if I put an arrow through your hand, it will heal inside of a minute, leaving me with very little to feel bad about. Leave Ryn alone, if you please."

Ester brought Eyera in close enough to prod her father in the side with the toe of her boot as he froze, caught red-handed.

“Ouch.” He rubbed at his ribs, grumbling as he turned to his daughter. “Don’t blame *me*. *He’s* the one still passed out.”

“He stayed up through the night to keep watch, probably with his senses engaged the entire time looking for little more than shadows,” Ester said with deadly steadiness. “Unlike *some* people, he has not slept since yesterday morning. Therefore—” she shoved her boot into her father’s chest repeatedly this time, a prod making every word poignant “—you will *leave. Him. Alone.*”

“Ouch!” Bonner exclaimed again, batting Ester’s foot away before stepping around to the relative safety of Declan’s other side. “Very well! Very *well!* I’ll let the blasted lizard sleep, I swear!” However, once Ester looked satisfied, he decided to push his luck. “As for your not -so-subtle accusations of sloth on my part, I would have you know that forming a lightning helix is *no small feat*, particularly for one who lacks any real affinity for fire!”

Ester’s glare had the man squeaking and cowering again in an instant, but Declan was too intent on Bonner’s words to play into the pair’s game.

“A ‘lightning helix?’” he repeated questioningly, looking around Ryn’s small form to Bonner. “Is *that* what that spell was?”

“*Declaan.*” It was almost alarming to hear something very much like pleading in Lysiat ay’ahSel’s voice, and he turned to find her and her brothers watching him imploringly as she signed *and* spoke with emphasis. “*In. Elvish. Please.*”

“Ah...” Declan stuttered, a little at a loss as to how to even *begin* discussing what was obviously *very* complicated pyromancy in elvish, given he doubted he’d be able to wrap his head around it in common as it was.

Apologies, Commander. I’m afraid Declan is hardly the only one unable to elucidate on the intricacy of magics of a nature as Bonner has so recently chosen to demonstrate.

As one, every head among them turned to Declan’s shoulder. Ryn was in the process of untucking his head from his wing—carefully, given the slim horns that curved from over each vertically-split, white-gold eye.

“Ah! You’re awake!” Bonner exclaimed, bending around Declan’s back to stick his tongue out at his daughter. “You see? There was no need for that savage beating.”

Ester rolled her eyes as Ryn stretched his neck and wings out.

Yes, I am awake, the dragon said steadily, and his tone made it clear he was hardly pleased with that fact while he looked around as the occasional *thud* of hail striking heads and trees and frozen earth continued to echo around them. *I image it would be hard for a boulder to catch any amount of significant rest when you are close at hand, Bonner.*

The old mage looked a bit more sheepish at this. “Ah... Sorry about that. One tends to be a bit... err... excitable after one sleeps for the better part of twenty-four hours.”

I wouldn’t know, would I now? Ryn said coolly, glaring at the mage.

Bonner only grinned back apologetically.

With Ryn’s—somewhat disgruntled—assistance, the conversation became a lot smoother, and Declan found his mood brightening significantly as Bonner happily dove into the intricacies of the spellwork he’d used to send the wights into the churning waters of the Lyons. The “lightning helix” turned out to be as complicated a weave as it had appeared, soon leaving Ester losing interest and Ryn sounding like he would have preferred to be translating any other topic. Declan, on the other hand was riveted—not the least bit because he was pleasantly surprised to find he actually *understood* a modest part of Bonner’s explanation—as were Lysiat, Aliek, and Tesied, the siblings all listening with mouths agape in a rare show of awe despite the fact they couldn’t have comprehended one word out of two even with Ryn’s assistance. It seemed—for *er’endeihn* who had been raised to fear magic as an enemy—the concept of spellwork that could do the kind of thing Bonner had shown them at the edge of the river was enrapturing.

As the march continued onward, Bonner managed to cleverly morph the conversation into a training session. Apparently seeing an opportunity to “scrub” some of those misconceptions he had been complaining about, he encouraged the ay’ahSels to observe Declan’s practice. Ryn saw this as his cue to leave, muttering about “singed feathers” as he leapt off Declan’s shoulder to flap up to Ester’s, apparently starting a private conversation with the half-elf as she began talking about her estimation of how much distance they’d covered since the dragon had been asleep. In their own world, Declan, Bonner, and the dark elf trio were soon jabbering as quickly as Declan’s limited elvish and signaling would allow, in particular once the old mage had him alternating between his suffusion spell and pyromancy. Showing off Declan’s steadily-improving grasp of the different arts, Bonner had him challenging the elves in a variety of strength competitions between working more acutely on his ability to summon flames without the help of the firestone.

The rest of the morning and part of the afternoon passed in such a manner, conversation and demonstration allowing them to ignore the pelting of the hail—which had gotten worse, Declan thought—expect for on the rare occasion the filtered ice struck any of them. At some point Orsik came over to nuzzle at Bonner’s hand hopefully, and the mage tended to the rest of the warg’s minor wounds even as he kept one eye on Declan’s training. After that, he’d taken to the animal’s back, and continued offering instruction and encouragement as the elves looked on.

Declan was *just* starting to feel the build of fatigue behind his eyes—likely two hours into the session—when Ester brought Eyera in close beside them again.

“*We’re slowing down,*” she said in elvish. Ryn, still on her shoulder, nodded as Declan and the others turned to look up at her.

We are, the dragon agreed, the pale clouding of his faint pupils looking to relax as he extended himself. *I’m assuming that means—Ob...!*

Whatever the dragon had sensed brought him up short, his hawkish body even straightening in surprise.

“What is it?” Bonner was the first to ask him.

Before Ryn could answer, there came a shout from the head of the march—Syr’esh’s voice, Declan thought—immediately echoed several times through the remains force. At once the elves who had been scattered through the woods on either side of them began to fall in, and with a sharp word from Lysiat the ay’ahSels too, started to take their leave.

“*What happens?*” Declan asked after them coarsely, starting to feel a little excited. The fact that no one was yelling or running seemed to say they at least weren’t being attacked again. “*We arrive?*”

If Lysiat and Aliek heard him, they were still too straight-laced to answer. Tesied, on the other hand, looked back to shoot him a sly grin, then nodded very briefly before falling in behind his siblings. In a blink they were gone, likely headed back towards the front of the march as the foot soldiers continued to form in around and in front of Declan and the others.

Yes. We’ve arrived.

Ryn changed as he dropped from Ester’s shoulder, his form mostly humanoid again before he even hit the ground with a *thump*. By the time he stood up, his *rh’em* had replaced his hawk’s form completely.

The city is less than a half-mile ahead of us, the dragon continued before anyone could ask, moving to Orsik to take up his sword from where it was still strapped to the now-healed warg’s harness. *Looks like the Colonel wants the unit to form up for presentation.*

“So close?” Ester asked quietly, sounding a little disbelieving. Declan could sympathize. It had now been nearly two months since they’d decided to seek out the hospitality—and help—of the *er’endebn*, not a week having gone by without exhaustion, complication, or battle. For them to be so near the goal of their journey now was... well... difficult to process.

“What’s it like?” Declan decided to ask instead, the anticipation still building as he looked to Ryn. “Ysenden? What’s it like?”

The dragon was still strapping the great black-and-gold blade to his back, but he shook his head at the question. *I think you’re better off seeing it for yourself. It won’t be long now.*

Despite the disappointing answer, Declan held his tongue, supposing Ryn had his reasons. Over the last months he had seen some truly incredible things, however, so if his friend was expecting him to be dumbfounded by whatever it was that awaited them beyond the edge of the forest, he suspected the dragon would be disappointed. He’d seen too much, now. Ryn’s true form, memories of a long-lost era that weren’t his own, the draugr, Bonner’s powers. As a cloud passed across the sun above them, casting a slowly growing shadow over the canopy to the north, Declan had to shake his head as he considered just how different the world he now knew was to the one he—

But then he blinked, lifting his head with a frown.

A shadow? No. That couldn’t be right. It had been storming all day. There would be no sun to speak of above the trees to form such a thing.

But... there *was* darkness. It was subtle, visible more in the absence of the few spots of cleaner light that made it through the snow- and ice-caked branches of the Vyr’esh than anything else, but it was there. Like night falling inch by inch with every step they took, blocking out a sky they couldn’t see.

“What the...?” Ester muttered quietly beside him, and when Declan glanced at her he was relieved to see she, too, had her eyes lifted. Bonner looked up at his daughter’s words as well, frowning at the growing darkness ahead of them, while Ryn kept on with his gaze set forward. Declan considered asking the dragon again what sort of “city” it was they were approaching, but thought better of it, doubting he would get any answer different from the first.

When they finally stepped out of the woods again, he was glad for his decision.

The Vyr’esh ended so abruptly, only Ester’s sidelong warning let them know they were approaching the edge. Ordinarily daylight—even on a dismal afternoon like this one—would have foretold the approach of the edge of the woods, but something seemed to be blocking the sun, tricking the eyes into seeing only more shadow before them. The forest ended, however, spilling the march in an ordered line into the storm, but despite the harsher pelting of the hail as they abandoned the shielding canopy, Declan could only stare.

“What in that is good and holy...?!”

A mountain. They had stepped out of the forest onto the cleared foot of a lone, single mountain rising up, dark and ominous, from the trees.

But... No. That wasn’t quite right. If this was a mountain, there was something distinctly odd about it. Even as close to the base of the black-and-grey slopes as they stood, Declan could tell that—rather than a jutting peak—the top of the great rise before them was... flat. Like some god had taken his sword to the furthest heights of the roughened shelves and crags that made up the slopes, relieving it of perhaps a quarter of its total height. Despite his earlier assumptions, Declan had never in his life seen anything like it, and he could only gape at the sight until more shouted orders brought his gaze down again, to the base that rose up before them.

The base, and the massive, jagged crevice that cut into the slopes, its depths hidden by a heavy stone wall and a single massive, iron-bound door, flanked on either side by half a dozen *er’endein* whose clean armor marked them as soldiers not of Colonel Syr’esh’s command.

“Oh. My. Word.” Bonner’s voice was tinged with wonder, and when Declan tore his eyes from the entrance guard he found the mage looking not at the grand gate, but rather still upward, at the top of the great rise before them. “Unbelievable... It’s a bloody volcano...”