

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

It turned out—to Declan’s complete dismay—that the mountain was in fact *not* flat, but rather *hollow*. Had anyone insisted on this before he saw it with his own two eyes he would certainly have questioned their lucidity, but when the gate was lifted for the officers at the front of the line—drawing upward into the stone itself—Declan was made a believer when he saw the well-lit wall of a rough-hewn tunnel within.

A “volcano”. A rupture in the great earthen “plates” that made up the world, deeper even than the leylines. Bonner could only give them a quick lesson, but his words were both mesmerizing and terrifying. He spoke of molten stone layers that were theorized to exist far, far below their feet, and how occasionally that magma rose to produce exactly what they saw before them. This volcano was clearly “inactive” he assured them after Ester and Declan had stared at him in horror following this description, but there would have been a time—millennia earlier, likely—when the land all around them had been flatted by an explosion that had likely blown the highest parts of the heights above them into the atmosphere. These details made *no one* feel any better, of course, nor did Bonner’s description of running rivers of boiling earth that would have spilled across the very land they now stood on, razing everything in their burning path.

Fortunately—or unfortunately, rather—they were distracted soon enough by raised voices from the front of the line of elves.

“What’s that?” Declan asked with a frown, cutting Bonner off as the old man started to delve into an explanation of how an eruption of such magnitude might have blotted out the sun.

“Not sure,” Ester answered, leaning forward atop Eyera to peer towards the front. “If I had to guess, though, I’d say the Ysenden guard probably doesn’t have to deal too often with a returning patrol saying they’ve brought strays home.”

Ysenden.

Declan nearly choked on the thought. *This* was Ysenden, the great city of the dark elves. In his awe—in his disbelief—he had nearly forgotten that fact, but as he looked up again he indeed noticed some abnormalities among the crags. Here and there what looked like flat panes of glass caught the dim light of the day, often shielded under an outcropping or the like. To the west, almost around the edge of the “volcano”, he thought he could make out a protrusion of some sort, extending out of the stone high, high above them, like a dome made up of more panes framed together to form the semi-spherical structure.

Ysenden...

“Master Ryndean. Master yr’Essel. Come with us, please. Declan and Ester, you and the warg as well.”

Declan’s attention was brought back as he barely caught the request. Dragging his eyes from the hidden city, he found that Lysiat and her brothers had returned, she leading as Aliek and Tesied flanked her dutifully, clearly coming back on the orders of the colonel or one of his remaining officers. Lysiat’s face was stony—even more so than her usual resting expression—and Declan felt a twinge of unease as he observed the commander.

At his left, Ryn sighed.

Can’t say this was unexpected, of course. The dragon looked around at Declan and Bonner. You two stay behind Ester and me. Hold onto Orsik and Eyera. Ester—he turned to look up at the half-elf—dismount, if you please. I don’t think it will do us good to give anyone the impression we might be looking down on them.

With a nod, Ester did as she was told. Declan and Bonner, too, fell in as instructed, requiring no explanation. If they assumed that Syr’esh and the others had reported their presence accurately, then there was a decent possibility that Ryn and Ester would be treated as honored guests first and foremost.

It might offer a buffer to the fact that they—the first specimens of their respective races to visit Ysenden in more than seven hundred years—had arrived in the company of two human mages and a pair of wild animals...

Without another word they followed the ay'ahSels up the line of the halted march, the elven soldiers parting for them in a practiced fashion. As he led Orsik through the *er'endben*—holding onto a strap of the warg's halter as though to falsely imply he had any control of the beast—Declan couldn't help but be amused by the range of emotions he saw hinted at in the faces of the stoic soldiers. There still, despite everything that had happened, was a healthy dose of dislike and contempt in the lines of some of the dark elves' features, visible through the spaces of their helmets. It could hardly be called a surprise. Mistrust ran deep in this place, of humankind and magic alike, though most of these soldiers couldn't have known of either from more than stories. What *did* surprise Declan, on the other hand, were the other emotions he saw signs of here and there. A brief nod of encouragement. A slight bowing of a head in respect. Even one elf—who was missing an arm that looked to have been tended to as only Bonner could have—offering the barest smile as they passed. It made Declan feel a little bit better despite the situation, and by the time they reached the very front of the line he was holding his chin high, ready to meet whatever resistance they were about to face.

He nearly lost his composure, though, when he saw that this particular battle was already being waged for them, and with surprising determination.

“*Vehi?*” one of the twelve guarding what had to have been the gates to the city demanded furiously, and Declan was just able to see that the patterns in his armor likely denoted him as the watch leader. “*Vehi?! Ysenden yu?! Ny!*”

“*Sed,*” Colonel Syr'esh answered calmly. “*Nom yst hal? Ny. Ny yst hal.*”

Declan frowned, muttering sidelong to Bonner. “Is it just me, or did the colonel just pull rank on a gate guard?”

The old mage was looking just as displeased. “Yes, he did...” he answered slowly, sounding like he couldn't quite believe it. “That doesn't bode well.”

Declan nodded in agreement, coming to a halt behind Ryn and Ester, who had stopped several paces behind Syr'esh and the watch commander.

Forcing a superior officer to pull rank would have been bad enough among the King's Vigil, but within the army of the *er'endebn?* Declan would have thought it a shocking event even if the dark elves standing around them hadn't been baring their teeth in outrage almost to a one. He could understand the surprise by the sentries, of course—the garrison had been little more than a scouting party, without the means by which to send word ahead to prepare the city for their arrival—but the gate was already opened, which meant their path had likely been halted only *after* the colonel had reported that the dark elves weren't returning alone. Sure enough, Declan noted that the rest of the watch had closed in to block the way into the torch-lit tunnel beyond them, cutting off their entry while their commander and Syr'esh argued.

Was his and Bonner's presence *that* big of a concern that a minor officer would disregard a superior's word so fervently?

“Now he's yelling about his 'duty to the city' being greater than anything else,” Bonner muttered in annoyance as the elves' words grew too heated for Declan to follow. “Blast... At this rate we'll be lucky if the guard don't try to skewer us where we stand.”

As though his words had tempted fate, it was in that moment that the watch commander looked beyond Syr'esh's shoulder to catch sight of their gathered party. The first thing he seemed to notice—not unexpectedly—was Ryn, but despite his eyes growing momentarily wide it wasn't more than a second or two before they slid from the dragon to Ester, then finally between those two to Declan and Bonner.

Declan didn't miss the shift in the elf's expression, and clenched his jaw as he saw what would happen next.

“You just had to say something, didn’t you?” he growled to Bonner.

Before the old man could ask him what he meant, the order came. The watch commander went for his weapon—a single sword sheathed on his belt—even as he shouted for his subordinates to do the same. In a flash the glossy black of elven blades were drawn or bared as spears and more swords bristled from the other sentries. Amazingly, however, they weren’t the only weapons brought out into the light, because Syr’esh’s shout echoed the inferior officer’s, and a heartbeat later Declan, Ryn, Bonner, Ester, and the warg were walled off from the threat as every member of the colonel’s inner circle and the nearest foot soldiers closed in to protect them. At any other point in time Declan might have laughed when he realized that the blade closest to him was held in none other than the skeptical Major y’Rehl’s firm grip, but the tension of the situation did not allow for such lighthearted irony.

For several seconds the two groups of elves stood gauging each other. Syr’esh was the only one in the vicinity who’d not drawn his blade, standing stone-still before the watch commander’s bared sword, but despite this it was apparent that the lesser officer was—at last—nervous. He and the rest of his minor retinue looked suddenly less confident in their position, as though they hadn’t expected anyone to seriously try and stop them as they drew blades on Declan and the others. Finding themselves instead facing down their own kind, their confidence was clearly waning, though the unit leader seemed yet unwilling to back down.

“*WHAT IN THE SPIRITS IS THIS?!*”

The only reason Declan understood the bellowed phrase was because Lysiat had treated him to a hundred variations of similar cursing during their morning training sessions. Every head in the vicinity—including the sentries and their commander—shifted to look to the tunnel entrance, where a surprisingly-broad, aged elf was thundering out from under the raised gate with what looked like another twenty soldiers at his back. Despite Declan not being able to see the patterns on the figure’s armor, he could tell *at once* that this was an officer of import by nothing more than the response to his arrival. As soon as the elf stepped out into the grey and hail, every blade dipped downward as each man and woman in the vicinity snapped to attention, Syr’esh included.

If the colonel was showing deference, then that meant...

“*Halus!*” the watch commander was the first to speak. “*Syr’esh-Hal revs ys veht y mytosyl!*”

Halus... “General”, Declan guessed, catching the rest of the insubordinate elf’s words as well.

Colonel Syr’esh returns with humans and mages.

It would have been understandable, given the anger in the watch commander’s tone, for this new ranking officer to have responded with a certain level of alarm. Indeed, as the twenty *er’endebn* who had accompanied the general spilled out of the tunnel to face them, Declan suddenly wondered at what point Syr’esh would order his own soldiers to stand down if only to avoid ending up facing off with whatever portion of the elven military was garrisoned in the city. At the very least Declan suspected he and the others were about to be surrounded and detained, doubly so when the general’s eyes swept to him and his companions, lingering on each of them in turn, Ryn in particular.

Declan, therefore, had to cock an eyebrow in surprise as the aging general—rather than shout for their seizure—eventually looked back to Syr’esh, his initially stern expression breaking into a wide smile before he brought his arms up as he approached the colonel swiftly.

“*Enfal!*” the old elf said as he reached Syr’esh, embracing him firmly. “*Yst revs! Yst revs!*”

“Huh...” Bonner snorted from beside Declan, looking on as the colonel raised his own arms to return the general’s solid welcome. “Well that’s a stroke of luck, I hope...”

“What is?” Declan had to ask, finding himself at a loss as the watch commander—still standing beyond the two higher officers—looked on furiously.

“His father, Declan.” Ester was the one to answer, glancing back at him over her shoulder and pointing. “That’s Syr’esh’s father.”

“Oh,” was all Declan to answer with, feeling the knot of worry in his gut lessen.

This was, fortunately, the point at which Bonner decided to start translating for him in earnest, which made everything come together much faster. It appeared that General Syr’esh—who Declan thought he should have *guessed* was the colonel’s parent given the pair’s matching breadth of chest and shoulders—was the commanding officer of Ysenden’s standing defense, and one of the highest ranking members of the military in the entirety of the city. The old elf listened intently as his son filled him in on the events of the last month, ignoring the wind and elements in favor of sharing their story. The colonel spoke quickly and to the point, explaining how Ryn, Bonner, and Ester had arrived first with Alick and Tesied, and how Declan had saved Lysiat and been guided to the camp some time later. He told the general of the tunnel, of their trek northward, and when he got to the previous day’s attack by the wights, the older elf looked over the gathered soldiers again heavily, taking in their reduced number with a frown. He put a hand over his heart at this point, as though in respect for the dead, but still answered his child.

“We’re being allowed within,” Bonner said with a sigh of relief. “He’s going to summon the Lord Commander—his superior—before we’re presented to the—”

But then, even as Colonel Syr’esh turned and motioned for the remainder of the garrison to head into the now-cleared tunnel, the mage froze. He wasn’t the only one, either. Before them, Declan noticed Ryn and Ester stiffening as well, going rigid at something the general seemed to have said.

“What?” he demanded, suddenly worried. “What is it?”

As the soldiers began to move out—the ay’ahSels stepping towards their group again as though ready to guide the way once more—Ryn was the one to answer, though his words weren’t directed at Declan in particular.

Does anyone know what the general meant, that ‘the Chancellor has been expecting us’?