

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“LEFT!” Declan bellowed, the elvish word rough on his tongue. A few paces in front of him, ay’ahSel snapped about at once, her black blade flashing in a clean, high arc through the air even as she did. The fox-headed creature that had slunk its way around to her flank didn’t even have time to completely get its crude club up for a downswing when the sword severed both its arms above the elbow.

The limbs and weapon fell to the forest ground in three separate *thuds*, blood leaking into the scattered white of the snow as their prior owner staggered away from the elf with a screech.

It turned out that Declan had been more than a little right about wolves likely being the least of their worries in the Vyr’esh. In the two days since he’d woken up—and their fourth combined free of the caverns of the Tears—they’d been accosted no less than seven times altogether by animals and beast, all of whom had made it obvious the potential meat of a man, elf, and maybe even a warg had outweighed any potential risk to their persons. The wolves *had* been the most frequent—though Declan thought the three assaults came from different packs each time, which was frightening in its own fact—but a pair of bears had also ambushed them as they’d camped along a frozen stream one night, as had a single massive, feline creature that he might have called a cougar were it not for the fact that the animal had been half-again as wide as any mountain cat he’d had the misfortune of stumbling upon. In the end, however, all of those animals had either been felled by he and ay’ahSel’s blades—she’d lent him her second sword again, once he’d proven himself capably of using it aptly—savaged by Declan’s pyromancy, or fled from the light and heat cast by the fire.

The biggest trouble, at the end of the day, was the one enemy who did not not so readily fear the flames.

The wereyn.

“BEHIND!”

ay’ahSel’s shout had Declan whirling in time to catch left-come swing at his ribs, the crude club of wood and bone *thudding* awkwardly into the ever-keen blade of his borrowed sword. Unperturbed by the entanglement, Declan bent back and snapped a kick upwards, catching the short beast—who looked to be more boar than man—squarely in the neck. The very subtle tingling in Declan’s leg jolted slightly with the impact, and the wereyn’s hoglike squeal was cut off as his foot crushed its throat. Before it could stagger far, though, letting go of the now-stuck club to clutch at its neck, Declan’s left hand slashed in its direction.

The poor thing couldn’t even scream in pain as the liquid fire that sprayed across its face and torso ripped into it, burning skin and cracking the shallow surface of its skull as it boiled everything inside in an instant.

The fight, though, was hardly done.

Quickly Declan kicked the club free of his blade, then spun again as a roar and several heavy footsteps told him his next opponent was fast on approach. The sword came up with him, but he ended up cursing and diving out of the way as a massive specimen of the monstrous race drove by him with its stag’s head bowed low. Its deliberately broken antlers, dirty and sharpened to deadly points, missed him by inches, and Declan rolled to his feet at the ready, gathering a weave of force and heat in preparation of meeting a second charge.

Instead, there was another roar—far louder, this time—and before the wereyn could even straighten fully to start to turn it went down under a ripping mass of grey-white fur and yellowish teeth.

“Good boy,” Declan snorted, turning from Orsik’s savaging of the screaming thing to face the greater fight.

Though ay’ahSel was still less than the spirit of graceful death he’d been when she and her unit had first coming pouring out of the shadows beneath the earth, more than enough of her strength and guile had returned to make her a terror to behold. Even with one sword absent from her ordinary pair the elf had carved a ring of bloody destruction into the group that had assaulted them, and was in the process of extending that circle further. No less than five of the beast men’s bodies lay already dead at her feet, and a sixth dropped—absent the better part of its head—even as Declan watched in fascination. His mere three—and a *half* he supposed, if he counted himself a strategic distraction for Orsik’s last kill—felt suddenly wanting, but he wasn’t about to kick himself just yet.

Every time he saw ay’ahSel fight he became more and more sure of that fact that trying to keep up with her would have been not unlike trying to outrace a charger.

“Oomph.”

Abruptly Declan's right knee partially buckled under him, and he cursed, staggering sideways a step. His distraction had cost him his focus, and the faint weave he'd spun into his limbs—already fragile—had failed. Grunting, Declan clenched the firestone in his left hand in concentration, willing the magic back into his body. It took a moment to find the balance again, to find the delicate push and pull of the magics that he'd discovered worked best, but he'd managed it, and the bare tingling returned to his arms and legs as he stood up straight again.

With a grimace, he looked around, found a pair more of newcomer wereyn slinking out of the trees to his left, and charged them with newfound strength.

It had been the linger weakness after his two days unconscious that had provided the inadvertent key to the secret of the weaves of imbuelement. Whether it was the time spent unmoving and not eating, or some effect of the magical exhaustion that had been its cause, his fortitude had not returned as quickly as he was accustomed. He'd suffered bedrest before, as well as some extent of the fatigue that he'd infrequently witnessed both Ryn and Bonner suffer after they expelled to much magic in any short time, but *this* weakness had proven an altogether different beast. It clung to him, hanging across his shoulders and weighing him down even these two days later. It had been almost crippling from the morning after he'd woken up, and when he'd failed to feel any better by the time they'd made camp for that first night—warm for once in the narrow circle of channeling runes he'd burned into the hard ground for them—a thought had struck Declan. Before, beneath the mountains, he had been trying to repeat the instance of power he'd experienced oh-so-briefly when saving ay'ahSel from the tunneler. It had been, explosion of strength borne of desperation, of the need he'd had to see them both free and clear of the rotten maw the undead creature, and it had proven impossible to replicate. All he'd every managed was the bare empowering of one hand, and then only for a brief few seconds.

But maybe—instead of continuing to chase that burst of magic—he could seek to attain a less measure of that magic, some weaker, subtler form of the weave...

Like, say... just enough to grant his arms and legs their usual strength.

This revelation had preceded a sleepless night of testing and experimenting, but Declan had just spent the last two days unconscious. A little missed sleep wasn't about to wear at him. What was more, his trialing had started to bear fruit almost at once, the moment he turned his attention from the that shock of power to a gentler, steadier weave. With a decrease in the amount of strength he was attempting to bind into his limbs the magics were less complicated, less volatile, and by the time morning had come Declan's ability to maintain this lesser spell of imbuelement had extended from that short time in a single hand to several minutes in both arms.

By the time the following day had ended—with plenty of empty hours to practice as he and ay'ahSel had ridden Orsik ever westward through the trees—his legs had followed suite, until Declan could at least weave himself into fighting form whenever an attack came.

He reached the two wereyn at a full run, catching them unawares with blast of heated energy. The first of the beasts caught the magic full in the side, the hair long its arm, thigh, and and half its face smoldering at once even as it was launched laterally to tumble in a ragged pile to the ground. The second Declan engaged with his blade, grimacing at the manish face that bared mismatched fangs too big for its mouth at him. This wereyn wielded no weapon, but the curved claws it sported at the end of too-long finger were plenty dangerous enough, and proven so when the thing slashed at him even as closed the last few steps between them. Ducking under the blow, Declan wasted no time with theatrics, driving his black sword into the beast man's belly before sidestepping and tearing the keen blade free through it side. As it collapsed behind him, he was already moving to engage the first wereyn that had managed to climb to its feet already, taking advantage of the dazed look in its eyes to relived it first of one leg, then its head as it fell sideways with a scream.

"ON ME!"

The command, yelled in elvish, had Declan whirling, and with a thrill he found that ay'ahSel had—at long last—possibly found herself in a situation that was beyond her ability to handle alone. Three more of the creatures had appeared from between the trees to join the two the commander had already been tangled with, surrounding her. She was doing a fair job of keeping them at bay, whirling and kicking up snow and pine needles as she slashed at the air in front of any wereyn that dared even feign closer, but even she couldn't move fast enough to take on any one or two of them without opening herself up to assault from behind. Orsik, Declan noted, had vanished, likely chasing some opponent or another off into the trees, leaving him the *er'endehn's* only backup.

Which was fine by him.

Fire led the way again as Declan barreled towards the group. Unfortunately he couldn't cast his weave of liquid flames at the back of closest of them—a ram-head thing that was moving around on all fours—too worried was he that ay'ahSel might be caught in its arc. On the other hand, he was more confident in slashing at the beast man immediately to the left of that nearest one, a short, squat thing that might have been a naked, wild woman aside from the black and white hair that coated its back and shoulders and what might have been oversized badger's claws for hands. The cruel magics spewed from Declan's fist once more, and a scream of pain and fear told him the fires had struck true, but he didn't look to check.

He was already cutting, cleaving the dark sword into the back of the ram-headed wereyn's legs, bringing it down heavily as the limbs collapsed abruptly beneath it with a shriek.

From there the fight ended in short order. ay'ahSel needed no other signal that help had arrived than the scream of the two felled beasts, and in a flash of sun and snow on glassy black a third of the group fell, then a fourth. Just in time Declan made sure his own pair were down for good, because it was with the elf that he turned on the last of the five, another fox-headed beast who held a crude spear capped with a rough stone tip in both hands. To its credit the wereyn bared oversized teeth defiantly as it backpedalled, threatening them with the longer weapon to keep them at bay while it tried to make its retreated. Declan, for his part, would have been happy enough to let it go, seeing no reason to risk either him or the commander getting stuck when they still didn't know how far they were from help.

But then, just as the wereyn's shoulders brushed the dark branches of a low-hung evergreen that might have been its salvation, yet another roar ripped through the forest, and Orsik's great bulk slammed into it from the side, bearing it to the ground as his massive jaws clamped about the thing's skull.

Even Declan winced when the warg strained, then ripped the fox head from the humanoid body with a sound like wet, tearing paper.

For a few second afterward, Declan and ay'ahSel stood still, scanning the edges of the now-bloodied trail the ambush had caught them in. Trusting the elf's hearing more than his—he wasn't about to make out anything over the sound of Orsik gorging himself on his last kill anyway—it was the trees Declan watched, tense and waiting. These wereyn had been of the wild kind, of the savage tribes and groups he and the others had seen some examples of when they'd been climbing the Tears weeks before. Like the first time the beast men had ambushed he and ay'ahSel the previous day, this party had poured in as reinforcements came, not intelligent enough to form any true strategy, but in numbers that still made them dangerous as the shouts and growls and screams had summoned all near enough to hear to the fight.

Fortunately, though, after a tense half-minute of nothing by the wind shifting the pines around them again, ay'ahSel relaxed at his side, and Declan too decided they were in the clear.

Body. Good? he signed at once after catching the commander's eye, managing the gestures even with the firestone held in his left hand.

She nodded in affirmation, then motioned the same question in return, gaze tracing him head to foot pointedly.

Good, he confirmed his own wellbeing before looking down at himself as well. His clothes—particularly his right side near where he'd torn the man-headed wereyn half-in-two, were drenched and bloody, but he didn't much care. It was uncomfortable to do, but he'd figure out a little variation to his usual weave of warmth that would let him dry the fabric later, though both he and ay'ahSel—whos black metal-and-leather armor was similarly slick with gore—were in desperate need of fresh clothes.

After seven encounters—plus the wolves that he had woken up to—the dried blood had basically dyed everything an ugly red, and they weren't likely to escape the smell of iron without a long bath and thorough torching of their current outfits.

Apparently satisfied that he was unhurt, ay'ahSel turned and knelt at once to clean her blade on the rough fur of the closest of the bodies near her. Declan almost chuckled at the sparseness of their communication, but did the same with his own blade before sliding it back into its sheath at their hip.

In addition to working on his weaves of strength, after the encounter with the wolves on first awakening he had made it a point to press ay'ahSel for several lessons in the language of the elves. His requests hadn't been complicated—they still got by mostly on the soldier's signals she'd continued to teach him—but hand gestures weren't much use in an active fight. He had already learned how to sign directions—such as “left” and

“right” and “behind”—so it hadn’t been hard to request the pronunciations of those words and a few others that would—and *bad*—come in useful in the pitch of battle.

All in all, even if they still weren’t any closer to finding signs of the promised base camp, it had been a productive—and *busy*—two days.

It wasn’t long after that the the three of them were on the move again, leaving behind the carnage as quickly as they could. They never bothered scavenging from the wereyn. The beast men as a rule rarely carried anything of value on them, and reeked of filth and rot even when *not* dead, which meant there was little to be gained from kicking their corpses about or collecting their weapons. Orsik was always allowed his fill as a reward for a well-fought skirmish, but in a forest as dense as the Vyr’esh prey was hardly scarce, so the warg never took too long with his gristly meals. Neither Declan nor ay’ahSel had to say aloud that it was for the better, either, because with the predators of the forest clearly *already* too-keen on the taste of man—or *elf*—flesh, lingering around fresh meat was the last thing they wanted to do.

For a little while they rode in relative silence, both of them more interested in their surroundings than anything else, concern that other enemies might be lingering in the area not easily dispelled. It was about a quarter hour—and two miles at Orsik’s trotting speed—that the leftover tension in ay’ahSel’s back subsided in front of Declan, and she turned in her seat to fix him with one appraising eye.

After a moment, a hand came up so he could see it.

You fight good.

Declan had to hold back a scoff, turning it into a cough that managed to breach the limits of the spell of warmth he’d once more weaved about them, misting a bit at the edges of the magic. He was surprised for one thing. The elf had hardly ever initiated conversation between them, and certainly never to *compliment* him.

“Where did that come from?” he asked of the woman, doing a poorer job of hiding a doubtful smirk as he answered with his own signs.

You fight more good. More, MORE good.

There was doubtless a more eloquent way of saying what he meant, he was sure, but it was the best he could manage, and Declan was honestly pleased to get that much across. He was learning quickly and—though the lessons were hardly as arduous as the training he and Ester had suffered at the hands of Ryn and Bonner—the complexity of the sign language was often enough to make him miss the old mage’s damn “arcanic laws” and “methodology of spellcraft.”

Yes. I fight better. Much better.

Declan deduced the last signs of ay’ahSel’s reply in context, and laughed dryly.

“Humble too, I see,” he said as he continued in kind.

Where you learn fight?

Ysenden.

Declan blinked, a little surprised. The elf had answered in spoken word, but that alone wasn’t all that strange. They’d been switching back and forth more and more whenever one or the other thought it was appropriate, or there was a learning opportunity. What had taken Declan aback, rather, was the tone of the elf’s answer.

Proud, maybe? And... a little sad?

He frowned, but fortunately his limited language was enough to voice his curiosity aloud.

Ysenden bad?

The response was immediate and all-telling. ay’ahSel stiffened in her seat, and a hiss of anger escaped bared, white teeth that were suddenly visible through the open slats in her helm.

Clearly Declan’s question had come close to blasphemy, if not stepped clean into it.

“Sorry, sorry,” he said at once, holding up a hand in what he’d come to learn was a universal signal of apology. “Uh, so... *Eserysh not bad?*”

He’d forgotten the word for “good”, but made do, and the question seemed enough to appease ay’ahSel’s irritation. She nodded curtly, then looked forward again, still rigid. For a minute or so after this Declan was treated to silence, and he’d just started thinking he had accidentally ended the first real conversation the elf had ever tried to start with him when she spoke again.

Ysenden vy eht. Ysenden vy ul’sed.

He only caught one word aside from the name of the city, but it was enough to clue Declan in.

“Ysenden is beautiful,” he translated for himself. “And Ysenden is... uh... *vy... ul’sed?*”

He tried to make his curiosity sound as genuine as it was, as eager to carry on the discussion as he was to learn more. He knew next to nothing of the great city-state of the *er’endebn*, of the last and only bastion to have withstood the onslaught of Sehranya’s forces when she had declared herself to the world by descending upon her own people. He’d carried an image in his head since Bonner and the others had first told him of the place, but having experienced the Vyr’esh now he wasn’t as certain his crafted picture of ten thousand great structures woven into and between the trees was likely to do the place justice. Ysenden had stood against the Endless Queen, and his recent experience with the dark elves of Eserysh spoke more to the ruling law of practicality and usefulness than any focus on real culture or beauty. If he’d had a thought to consider it in the last two days, he supposed he would have conjured up the image, rather, of some great black fortress rising out of the trees, a circular keep of hard, cold stone and rigid edges, unforgiving and simple in their make.

But here was ay’ahSel telling him it was beautiful...

In answer to his question, the dark elf appeared to consider how best to translate. After a moment she turned and—with an expression not without its doubt—held up thumb and forefinger barely a fraction of an inch apart.

“*Y’sed,*” she said with deliberate enunciation, then broadened the space between her finger tips to as wide as she could get them. “*N’sed.*” She lifted her other hand free off where it had been holding onto Orsik’s harness for stability, apparently trusting in her balance and the warg’s slow gate as she spread her arms out, palms inward and facing each other. “*Ul’sed.*”

Declan was rather pleased to have followed along, and he grinned.

“Close. Far. Very far.” He nodded to show his understanding. “*Ysenden vy ul’sed.* Ysenden is very far away.”

Whether she grasped that he’d comprehended or was merely gratified that he was trying, ay’ahSel did something then that he had never once witnessed before.

She smiled.

Then, as quickly as it had come, it was gone, and was turning away again to look forward, taking up the straps once more.

I’m not the only whose far from home, Declan thought suddenly, watching the black hairs of the elf’s sway back and forth across the back of her helmet.

It struck him, then, that there was perhaps a reason his image of Ysenden was so cold and hard. In his experience the *er’endebn* had been little more than just that: icy and unbending, more interested in protocol and structure than anything else. Not once in the four days after they had left the drey behind had the dark elves interacted with any of their group but Ryn, and then only when absolutely necessary. Not once had they expressed any curiosity—much less *interest*—in their “prisoners” despite the fact that the four of them had included a human, a dragon, a mage, and a half-blooded wood elf. It had always given Declan the impression that the *er’endebn* were more automaton than living thing, like breathing puppets capable only of executing their actions in specific, inflexible sequence.

And yet now, more than a week separated from any of her kin and very possibly as far removed from anything she could call “home” as she had every been, Lysiat ay’ahSel was starting to break from that mold little by little.

There was more, too. More that pointed to the dark elves being something greater than the emotionless black stone they might have been carved from when Declan and the others had first encountered them. There was the way they fought, for one thing, the way ay’ahSel—even injured—swept across a battlefield with all the fluid grace of wind over an open plain. There was the complexity of their language—languages, Declan had to correct for himself, emphasizing the plural in his head—and even the master of crafts beyond that of swinging a sword.

He’d had little light and opportunity to examine any of the *er’endebn*’s armor in the tunnels, but under the even-dim illumination of the sun through the clouds above Declan had had his chance over the last few days, and it had amazed him. The gold-bound black of the metal-lined leather was not, as he’d thought before, without ornamentation, but was merely so subtly detailed it was next-to impossible to make out the meticulous adornments that wound their way over and across the surfaces of the armor. Patterns had somehow been stained into the metal, distinct in the right light, depicting intertwined, stiff lines and knots like branches growing around, through, and into each other. The leather, too, was marked with similar symbols, but—though Declan

had never braved running a finger across any portion of the armor for fear of losing his hand—he was almost certain the surfaces of the materials were unblemished, smooth and clean without additional ridges that might provide counter-productive purchase for an enemy’s blade. The *sound* of the leather too, astonished him, for no other reason than there *was* no sound, or at least hardly enough for any but the sharpest of ears would have made out even in a deadly quiet room. He’d considered and cast aside the possibility of enchantment first, given the *er’endben’s* clear distrust of magic, and settled instead on the likelihood that every suit was custom-fit to an individual, with each inside layer of every plate and flap lined specifically for silence to boot. Silk, likely? Or animal fur? Whatever the case, Declan knew men who would have given their left hand for armor of this quality, and the longer he spent with ay’ahSel the closer he was to counting himself among them.

It only convinced him further that there was more to the dark elves than Ryn and Bonner had been able to tell him when they’d revealed the people’s existence in the first place, and certainly more than Declan would have assumed at a glance.

Deciding he couldn’t pass up the opportunity to know more, Declan brought up a hand, but hesitated. He had been intending to try to ask the commander to describe Ysenden for him, but he wasn’t sure how to pose the question.

In the end, he decided to go for the long shot, sticking his hand over her shoulder to gesture as best he could.

Speak. More.

The elf looked around at him again, frowning and clearly not understanding.

“Tell me more about *Ysenden*,” he told her, being careful to enunciate the name of the city as she pronounced it before repeating his gesture.

Speak. More.

The elf seemed to understand then, the eyebrow he could make out raising in surprise. She opened her mouth, looking all the world like she would have been happy to say more, but paused and frowned again, clearly considering herself how best to explain. After a few seconds she looked ready to try again, but before she could get so much as a word out they were interrupted by a voice tearing through their thoughts.

DEC... EC... LAN!

Declan started so hard he nearly sent himself sliding off of Orsik’s back. In front of him ay’ahSel, too, jerked in surprise, and she twisted forward again at once, gaze snapping from tree to tree in alarm as her hand slid automatically to the handle of her sword. Beneath them, even the warg had jolted to a stop, snorting and sniffing at the air in confusion, clearly having heard the voice but not understanding it. Their pairs reactions made sense, of course. The broken words—the scattered syllables of Declan’s own name—had been soundless, coming from nowhere and everywhere. More than a week away might have shaken Orsik’s familiarity with the mind magics, and Declan didn’t think ay’ahSel could have heard that voice even a score of times before they’d gotten separated from the group.

They’d been deliberately practicing mind-speech privately at the time, after all.

“Ryn...” Declan hissed, not believing what he’d heard for a moment, eyes immediately lifting to the bare line of the sky they could make out through the branches above their west-leading trail. For second there was nothing.

Then the voice came again, louder and clear.

DECLAN!

“RYN!” Declan answered, laughing as he tossed a leg off of Orsik to slide off the warg. He’d momentarily forgotten how weak he was still feeling, and his knees gave out the moment his boots hit the ground, but he didn’t care. He shoved himself back up at once, just managing it even without the help of magic, and started limping up the trail as fast as he could, eyes still glued to the sky. He didn’t hear ay’ahSel shouting after him in elfish, nor heard her urge Orsik to start chasing after him when her confused questions went unanswered. He was too focussed on heavens, watching the clouds with an overwhelming sense of excitement. He knew what to expect. For Ryn’s mind-speech to have been so fragmented, then so clear, he had to be closing the mile-plus distance between them quickly. His hawk’s form would not have managed that sort of speed, which meant...

WOOSH!

With a downward blast of icy air that managed to briefly penetrate Declan’s spell of warmth, a massive, familiar shadows swept by overhead from the north, looking to be in the process of circling around to meet

them as it set the treetops to swaying. Declan laughed with joy, seeing the great shape of the dragon's true form vanish, then appear again a few seconds later a ways ahead, great wings beating heavily as Ryn came to a stop in midair.

Then he dropped below the treeline, and the distant crack and snap of breaking branches was shortly followed by the heavy *BOOM* of the landing dragon, the impact of his descent so great that a fresh fall of snow, needles, and pinecones came loose from the evergreens all around them, showering Declan, ay'ahSel, and Orsik alike.

None of them cared.

Despite the protest of his weakened limbs, Declan ran, then, ran as best he could. The deer trail had been partially covered by the shaking of the trees, but he didn't need a path anymore. With ay'ahSel atop Orsik loping steadily along behind him, he barreled through the woods in the direction he knew the dragon waited, unable to stop himself from laughing and shouting his friend's name as he did. The Vyr'esh was so dense that despite Ryn's proximity there wasn't so much as a hint of him for nearly half a minute, the trees swallowing all with their somber weight.

And then, ahead of him, Declan saw the brightness of rare clear air, and a few seconds later he was stumbling out into what had been a small clearing made wider by the dragon's arrival.

Ryn had shifted from his larger form, having taken the shape of his *rh'eem* as he for them. He stood anxiously not far from the edge the woods, all eight feet of his scaled form tense with anticipation, and the moment he saw Declan the dragon was bounding forward to meet him!

Declan! Thank your damned Mother!

They met in a rush, the dragon taking and embracing him so hard Declan's feet actually left the ground for a second. He wheezed as his friend's inhuman strength squeezed the air from his lungs, and had just started to fear he was going to break a rib when Ryn put him down and pushed him away to hold at arm's length.

Are you all right? Are you well? We've been searching for days! What happened? How did you—?

The dragon's rush of words only stopped when ay'ahSel made her appearance, stepping out into the clearing atop Orsik with a crunch of snow.

And you both made it! Well that will certainly smooth things over back at the camp...

"We're *fine*, Ryn," Declan assured the dragon, extracting himself from his friend's grasp to wave down at his clothes. "A little banged and in *desperate* need of change of outfits, but fine, I promise."

Ryn nodded slowly, though his expression was dubious as he took the three of them in, white-gold eyes lingering the red-stained fabric of Declan's shirt and pants, then the bandage about ay'ahSel's head that was still just visible under the lip of her helmet.

If you say so, though you both look much the worse-for-wear than when I saw you last... He paused, his gaze dropping to Orsik as the warg padded happily over, tongue lolling and fangs half-bared in the sort of smile only creature his size could manage. *All three of you, rather.* Ryn bent down slightly to scratch the animal under the chin, earning one of Orsik's rumbling purrs of enjoyment as the dragon eyed his neck and face. *Where did these wounds come from? They look like teeth marks.*

"Wolves," Declan answered simply, eyeing the warg himself. Orsik was as battered as he and ay'ahSel, and indeed had a scattered few new bite marks to show for his efforts in their fights. "You lot haven't encountered any?"

Hardly, Ryn snorted. *I've sensed the packs—and worse—in the woods, but they've stayed clear of the camp.*

For the first time, ay'ahSel spoke up. "*Vulf fehn a tres y'ehn.*"

Ryn made a face. *Yes, I supposed you three would have made more interesting targets, alone like you were. But this bad?* He fingered one of Orsik's new wounds with a claw carefully as he pet the warg between the ears with his other hand.

"This is nothing," Declan answered with a snort, rolling a sleeve up to show the dragon his forearm, the scarred skin of it still largely bare and hairless from the inferno he'd been forced to summon in the mountains. "That thing—the tunneler, I'd called it—caught us just as we were nearing the exit. Nearly brought the ceiling down on me before I could kill it. The wolves haven't been much of a hassle, in comparison."

He didn't see Ryn freeze mid-pet, ay'ahSel having caught his attention from atop Orsik to his left. She must have caught his meaning, because she signed her additions sarcastically.

"Oh, well... There were the bears too, I guess," Declan translated. "And the cat. And the wereyn."

When he looked around at Ryn again, the dragon had turned to stare at him, slack-jawed and eyes wide.

“What?” Declan feigned confusion, hiding a grin even though he knew what was coming.

It took his friend a moment to answer.

... *That thing. The creature, in the tunnels... You killed it?*

Before Declan could answer, though, ay’ahSel beat him to it. In fluid elvish—of which Declan only caught the words “fire” and “dead”—she seemed to summarize the events beneath the mountain in quick order, leaving Ryn looking only more stupefied when she finished.

You did that?! the dragon demanded of Declan almost the moment she finished her retelling. Are you insane?!

“Thought you’d say that,” Declan answered, his laugh a little forced. Despite the days—and miles—of separation, he was a ways yet from shaking the feeling of fire and magic and trembling stone from his memories, much less the scream of the worm as it had been first consumed by the molten rock, then by its own shattered Purpose.

For good reason, Declan! Ryn’s voice came through as a hiss. What if you’d failed?! You’ve not even two months of training! Weaving something that big... What if you’d passed out sooner?!

“Then we’d be dead,” Declan said matter-a-factly, shrugging. “All three of us. But no more dead than if I hadn’t tried, Ryn. There was no outrunning it. You know that, and ay’ahSel will tell you there was no fighting it on even ground, either. She got a good look at it before it went up in flames. If we hadn’t stopped it, we would have been flatted against the floor the tunnel. *At best.*”

Ryn looked like he wanted to argue, his expression still set alarmed, but after a second or so seemed to think better of it.

Fine, he finally answered with an exasperated kind of sigh. If you had not other choice, I supposed there’s nothing else for it. Still, I’m surprised you’re standing, even if you survived. Draining yourself like that... I know of more experienced mages who put themselves in a coma for doing much the same, Declan.

In answer, Declan grimaced. “I almost did. I was out for two days apparently. It helped to have this one—” he indicated ay’ahSel with a tilt of his head “—yelling in my ear that we were basically done for if I didn’t wake up. She brought be back in the middle of fight with a wolf pack.” He shivered dramatically at the memory. “Not the best way to come to, I assure you.”

It was Ryn’s turn to snort, and he looked to *er’endehn* again. *Your brothers worry for you, commander. They will be pleased to have you back in one piece.*

The elf grunted dubiously, bringing a finger up to tap at the side of her helmet pointedly as she answered.

Mostly’ one piece? Ryn laughed. *Bonner can see to that, I assure you. I’m positive he’ll want to get his hands on the both of you as soon as he can, if you’ll allow it. And speaking of—he turned back to Declan—I recommend we get moving. We’re about half-a-day’s walk from the camp, though we can cut that in half if Orsik is still willing to keep carrying one of you.*

“ay’ahSel can stay with him,” Declan said with a nod. “He’s used to her, by now. She spent a day out cold herself, and he’s been her legs ever since.”

Good. There was a whirling of movement—and a hiss of surprise from the dark elf—and a second later Ryn’s dragonling-form had been replaced by the warped, black charger Declan had grown familiar with over the last few months. *Then I’ll carry you.*

“You sure?” Declan asked, uncertain. “Your true form is hard to take, isn’t it? Aren’t you tired from—”

Declan, I’ve been in my true form for the better part of the last five days, ever since I was given leave to look for you by the camp commander. If it wasn’t so cold above the trees I would have carried you all and had you back in a half-hour. I’ve paid my due in sleep, don’t worry, so get on.

Satisfied, Declan shrugged and did as he was told. Taking hold of Ryn’s mane, he started to pull himself up

Only then did he recall that—white Ryn’s appearance had certainly chose a little bit of life back into his legs for a moment—he was still weak.

The dragon’s equine head turned to look around at him in concern, ay’ahSel and Orsik circling around his other side already in preparation to depart.

Everything alright?

“Fine,” Declan answered quickly, not wanting to worry his friend. Instead he took a moment, centering himself, and called on his weave of strength once more. The magic slipped into place with every-increasing

ease, and the moment the tingling thrum of the magic had returned to his limbs Declan slung himself up and over his friend with a jump and heave, settling into the long-familiar place on Ryn's back.

The dragon, though, didn't budge.

Declan. What was that?

Declan grinned again, lifting one hand to show the dragon, opening and closing his fingers repeatedly. "Like that? Bonner's always going on about the other schools of magic, so I thought I'd teach myself a few tricks."

Ryn, though, didn't answer, staring him down until Declan caved with a dry chuckle.

"Fine. It's imbument. Or at least I think it is... Figured it out after pulling ay'ahSel from the tunnel. It happened on its own the first time, but I've been figuring it out since. I can only manage a weak weave right now, but it's still handy. I'd be useless right now without it."

Ryn yet didn't look away from a long time. Still waiting for them nearby, ay'ahSel seemed to sense that something odd was going on, because she frowned between the two of them.

Then, at last, Ryn turned forward again and began stepping carefully through the high snow of the disturbed clearing.

You're even more like Herst than I thought, he said after a moment, taking the lead as ay'ahSel urged Orsik to fall in behind him.

"Oh?" Declan asked, heart leaping the slightest bit. Though Ryn and Bonner had told him much of the tale of Amherst al'Dyor already, he still felt like he knew next to nothing about his forefather.

The dragon nodded, head dipping slowly as they stepped into the dense cover of the evergreens of the Vyr'esh again.

Yes. You recall he was a swordsman too, correct?

It was Declan's turn to nod. "One of the best."

The best, the dragon corrected. *At least of all the soldiers and fighters I've known in my life, including you and Cassandra Sert. That wasn't all raw talent, though, at least not after Aletha's assault on the Reaches.*

"Bonner's said as much," Declan agreed slowly. "He told me about Herst's use of strengthening magics. It's the reason I've been practicing."

Good. Keep doing so. If there was one area of magic he could claim to have a great grasp of than his prodigal sister, it was in such spells. One final glance back, the white-gold eye bright in the black from of the dragon's face. *Maybe you're finally scratching at the surface of your ancestor's legend, Declan.*

Declan chuckled, patting Ryn's neck affectionately. "For now, I'll stick to hoping for some fresh clothes and a hot meal, old friend."

Ryn, too, grinned then.

Only if you tell me everything, starting from the moment you ran into the tunnel like a bloody idiot, he answered, picking up the pace as the forest claimed them once more.