

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

*Loyalty is a complicated thing. It is—as are all aspects of intelligent psychology—a layered concept. Take a soldier—a common soldier—for example. Loyalty seems a simple enough concept to apply to this person. Loyalty to the crown. Loyalty to the country. Loyalty to military. In those terms, conflict is unlikely. What happens, however, when one adds other things to the mix? Loyalty to one's brothers in arms, or one's home, or one's family, even. What occurs, suddenly, when an order from the crown that common soldier is supposed to bend the knee to challenges a sense of allegiance to something outside the common prevue?*

*After all, at the end of the day, what a person must be most loyal to is nothing less than their own conscience...*

- *The Curse of Ego*, by author unknown,  
c. 450p.f.

"*You play your part well,*" General Sureht Syr'esh said as he opened the door to his private offices, stepping inside before motioning for the figure following him to enter.

"*I hardly think my own acting worthy of praise by comparison, General,*" the husky voice of Yl'ah Ryvus, the council's spymaster, answered in fluid elvish. "*As I understand it, you've been maintaining your masquerade for centuries now, after all...*"

Sureht grunted nondescriptly, closing the door again the moment the figure had stepped into the office. They looked around, the feminine features of their face twisted into a smile at the modest accoutrements that decorated the plain stone walls of the chamber, as though amused by the space.

It was a smile that made Sureht—former Lord Commander of Syr'hend before its fall—shiver in discomfort.

They had detoured for only a single stop after departing the council chambers, pausing at Yl'ah Ryvus' personal rooms momentarily to pick up a large package, a cloth bundle wrapped about something roughly the length and width of a man's thigh, now being held reverently in the figure's arms. Catching sight of the desk, however, they moved towards it without pause, depositing the hidden object so carefully upon the lacquered wood it might have been a newborn child.

"*I admit I feared us discovered, when as'ahRel spoke to you directly,*" Sureht said, watching the form of Yl'ah Ryvus stand up straight to examine the room again. "*I hadn't realized you would be able to imitate her voice as well as her form.*"

The figure dropped their gaze to smile at him directly, that same amusement lingering unpleasantly in eyes that were not theirs.

Then, with a wave of one hand over the heavy gold ring about the thumb of the other, everything about them changed.

Yl'ah Ryvus' tall, slender form shortened and broadened, becoming slightly hunched. The white hair cropped to her ears lengthened and darkened, becoming lank and greasy, and the sharp features of the dark elves paled and wrinkled. Within a few seconds, the spymaster was no more, replaced completely by an old, human man with long, limp grey hair.

Unfortunately, aside from the black-and-orange robes Sureht had pilfered for him days ago, Gonin Whist's insufferable smile was all that remained of the previous graceful form.

"*You selected Ryvus for me specifically because she hardly ever saw fit to speak at such meetings.*" The old mage's natural voice was weaker and crueler than the spymaster's. "*In that, you chose well. But my master is vigilant. Of late she has*

*been experimenting with a variety of... uh... 'borrowed' magics. When physically changing one's entire appearance, it is only a small leap to adapting the inner workings of the body as well, vocal cords included."*

"As you say..." Sureht answered warily, looking the mage up and down. "*Will the dragons not sense this?*"

"*Dragons are more limited creatures than you might think.*" Whist chuckled as he lifted one hand, showing off the ring still about one thumb. Whereas the jewelry had momentarily before been a heavy gold band, it was now almost black, and textured with sharp, cruel carvings. Observing them, Sureht—who knew nothing of magic—felt suddenly nauseous, like whatever spell was engraved into the ring was wicked enough to discourage even proximity to it.

"*Dragon bone,*" the old mage answered the general's unasked question, turning his hand around and studying the thing for himself approvingly. "*Infinitely harder to come by than the common remains of man and elf. Allows for much more potent spellwork. You need not concern yourself with the High Chancellor and his 'primordial'.*" Whist stated the title with a sneer. "*They are as blind to my presence now as they were in the council chambers, despite my appearance.*"

"*Be that as it may, I would prefer to see our business concluded sooner rather than later, mage,*" Sureht told the man, moving to stand on the other side of the desk from him to look down at the bundle of cloth. "*You said you had what I needed to conclude this charade. Show it to me.*"

Whist smirked, but turned and reached for the cloth all the same.

"*I must admit to curiosity, General,*" the old man said as he began unwrapping the object. "*When I was tasked with bringing about the end of your kind, I had not imagined to find myself such an influential ally.*"

Sureht felt something squeeze at his heart at the question, but ignored it.

"*There remains no such thing as 'my kind' anymore, mage,*" he said quietly, watching the man's hands work.

"*But was it not my master who saw to that? I have to say I find your motives odd...*"

Sureht swallowed, feeling his fists clench unbidden at his sides. "*Your Witch was only the beginning of the end. We are—were, rather—a people of war. We lived and died on the battlefield. If Sebranya was to be our destruction, then that would have been acceptable, terrible as such a close might have been. But no... It was what came after that ended the er'endehn of old, and we are better off joining our ancestors with the spirits than lingering as this pathetic echo of what we once were, covering in a winged shadow...*"

"*Two winged shadows,*" Whist said with another smile, like he were basking in Sureht's fury. "*Your master has a master, now.*"

"*That beast is no master of mine,*" Sureht hissed.

The mage nodded this time, chuckling to himself. "*If you say so.*"

Then he pulled the last of the wrappings away from the parcel, and Sureht had to forcefully stop himself from taking a step back at the sight of the thing.

Again, it wasn't the actual object that so sickened him. It was a skull, shaded the same near-black as the ring on Whist's thumb, and even to his untrained eye the general could tell it had once belonged to a dragon. It bore a long snout and large orifices where the eyes and ears should have been, and the clean ridges of curved fangs half the size of Sureht's finger would have been enough to go by alone. Separate from the whole, it might have been an impressive curiosity, if one to be disposed of before the High Chancellor realized such a thing was being kept within the walls of Ysenden.

Once more, however, it was the carvings that had nearly driven the general away from the desk.

In a mirrored pattered originating from a single, foul emblem chiseled into the crown of the skull, the markings poured outward. Not an inch of the bone was unblemished, down to the teeth themselves, and if he'd been brave enough to lift the thing Sureht suspected even the roof of the mouth would have been cut into. Like the ring, there was something about these symbols—these 'runes', he thought he'd once heard them called—that spoke of nothing but death and ill tidings to the general.

That was fine, though.

Death and ill tidings were exactly what Ysenden was in need of.

*"This is it?"* he asked after taking a moment to make sure his voice was steady, forcing himself not to look away from the carved dragon skull. *"This will be enough? It seems... small."*

Standing over the thing on the other side of the desk, Whist gave a dark laugh that was—for once—not the least bit amused.

*"This will be enough,"* he assured Sureht, depositing the wraps beside the skull. *"It seems small because it is the skull of an infant beast, the only one the drey managed to drag away alive. I assure you, however, that it will not fail you."* He lifted his hand again to show off the ring once more as a reminder.

Sureht nodded slowly, not bothering to look up. *"And how do I activate it?"*

*"As I instructed you before. Drench the sigil in blood—"* Whist pointed to the larger emblem in the middle of the skull, obviously being careful not to touch the bone with his long finger *"—and it will awaken."*

*"For how long?"*

The old mage shrugged. *"Long enough. You have in your possession the only artifact of its kind, General. We did not exactly have the opportunity to test it."*

Sureht nodded again. *"Even a day or two would be sufficient, so long as the stage is set."*

*"Ah, yes. To that end..."* Whist reached into the pockets of Ryvus' robes, pulling out a small, square bottle that looked like it was filled with water. *"The other thing you asked for."*

Without a word, Sureht held out his hand for the vial.

Whist relinquished it at once, smiling again as he did. *"I believe—as you say—this concludes our business, general. Place the skull as close to the center of the city as possible, and my master's weaves will do their part. We trust you to deal with the rest."*

*"Your trust means nothing to me,"* Sureht growling, looking levelly at the man. *"Were this a different time and a different place, I would have struck your head from your shoulders the moment you showed your foul form to me, mage. I despise you. I despise you, your magic, and you spirit-cursed master. There is nearly nothing in this world I hope for more than to see you snuffed from existence."*

Whist shrugged, unperturbed by the menacing words. *"'Nearly', being the operative word. A common enemy will make allies of the strangest sorts. You might be surprised what kinds of friends my Queen has made, in these long years. You are not the only one to loathe the hand history has dealt you."*

Sureht felt like spitting at the old man, but held himself back. *"You have done your part. Now leave me, so that I might prepare for mine. When the time comes I will bury the skull in the middle sanctum, in the yr'es, and act from there."*

Whist bowed with mocking respect before turning and making for the door again. As he did, he waved his free hand over the dragon bone ring once again, and in the three steps it took to reach the room exit had transformed back into the tall, graceful figure of Yl'ah Ryvus.

He had just placed his once-again-feminine hand upon the handle when Sureht spoke up one last time, unable to help himself.

*"Whist."*

The mage looked over his shoulder, elven eyes almost politely expectant.

*"What did you do with her?"* the general asked, overcoming the instinct screaming at him that he didn't want to know the answer. *"With the real General Ryvus?"*

The mage smiled cruelly. *"Dragons learn new forms through decades of observation and study. Our method is... more surgical."*

*“Meaning what?”*

*“Meaning wearing another’s actual flesh is easier than learning to recreate it.”*

And then, with that cryptic answer, Whist was out the door, letting it close behind him as he left, and leaving Sureht Syr’esh falling heavily into the chair behind his desk, cursing the Witch, cursing the High Chancellor, and—most fervently of all—cursing himself.