

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Declan was, for once, the one to keep his head on straightest in the following moments. He suspected, in hindsight, that his more-recent exposure to the flood of wonders and terrors that had been hidden from man's eyes had finally hardened him to astonishment, because both Ester and Bonner might as well have lost their tongues for all the words they managed to get out as he led them one after the other to two of the chairs set about the first half of the study. After that, it had been to Orsik and Eyera that he'd looked, but the warg had padded in happily enough once it was clear there was no danger beyond the entrance, and were now moving about the room sniffing at corners and every shelf their noses could reach, which was most of them.

Deciding to leave the door open in case as'ahRen and the others were planning to join them, Declan finally turned to take in the two dragons, who had been facing off without another word after Ryn had spoken.

"Alright. Obviously there's some explaining to be done." He looked to Arrackes, hesitating only briefly. "Erm... I would think it might be best if you'd start, uh... Chancellor?"

The dragon at last looked away from his primordial to cast Declan with an amused expression. Aside from his red eyes, he stood in contrast to Ryn in several ways, including coloration. Instead of jet-black scales, Arrackes' were more grey, and striped with burgundy slashes along his face and neck that said that his body as a whole was likely so marked. What was more, his horns were smaller, and he stood nearly half-a-foot shorter than Ryn—only barely taller than Declan himself, in fact—and the realization struck Declan suddenly that he had a comparison for the first time in his life. Though it might partially have been his comparative youth—Arrackes had an air about him that spoke of an age more likely measure in millennia than centuries or decades—it was obvious even at a glance that Ryn was not only bigger, but very likely faster and stronger than the smaller dragon, even in the form of their *rh'eems*.

Was this the difference? Declan had to wonder as he took Arrackes in. *Was this what it meant to be a 'lesser' dragon? To lack the blood of the primordials?*

That would indeed be fair, I suppose, the older dragon answered at last, turning back to Ryn. *I should first apologize, I imagine. If I had been able to send word to you of the developments of these last centuries, I would have.*

So it's true? Ryn asked, speaking more in a growl than anything. *You admit it?*

That I am High Chancellor of the er'endehn? Yes. It has been so for the last 300 hundred years, in fact.

300 y—? Ryn started snarled before catching himself. *Why? Or rather: how? This was not your task, Arrackes. This was not your duty.*

Not initially, Ryndean, no. Arrackes shook his horned head, starting to move around the desk as he continued. *But things changed, and I would argue this is exactly what your order entailed.*

Explain, Ryn growled.

The older dragon dipped his head respectfully as he came to stand before his sovereign. *You tasked me with overseeing the er'endehn. With observing and protecting them.*

Precisely. Not to rule them.

That was not my decision. Arrackes' tone grew a little sharper. *Believe me, that was not my decision. Not at any point has it so been for the last three centuries, in fact.*

Oh? Then whose decision was it, then?

"That would be mine."

Together every head in the room—except the High Chancellor's—turned towards the study door, where as'ahRen, Syr'esh, and the ay'ahSel siblings looked to have finally caught up to them. The Lord Commander strode in confident and tall, and again Declan was struck by the man's presence. By comparison, the Colonel,

Lysiat, Aliek, and Tesied looked almost-shy as they followed their superior, white-red eyes darting about briefly before settling on Arrackes, then looking away again quickly.

If as'ahRen could command the power to split crowds with nothing but a step, Declan supposed it made sense that the High Chancellor—the only office higher than the old elf's, if he understood correctly—could only wield even great authority.

“It was mine,” the Lord Commander said again, looking to Ryn as he came to stand between the chairs Bonner and Ester were still seated in. “Mine, and the Chancellor’s council.”

The council? Ryn hissed in disbelief. *How? How would they allow this? Arrackes was sent to be a guardian, Lord Commander. Not a ruler.*

“Oh it was hardly unanimous,” as'ahRen admitted with a shrug. “There were certainly some who kicked and screamed until the very end, but the High Chancellor’s mantle is one granted by the people, Master Ryndean, and the people had spoken. Some will still mutter and gripe behind closed doors to this day, even among those who have held their seats on the council all these centuries—General Syr’esh, who you have already met, is one such longstanding critic—but there’s nothing to be done once the votes are cast.” At the Lord Commander’s back, *Colonel Syr’esh* blinked at this, but gave no other indication of reaction.

Well that explains the anger, Declan thought, recalling the brief expression he had caught from the guard commander when as'ahRen had bowed to Ryn.

Meanwhile, the Lord Commander had kept on, gesturing to Arrackes. “You say you’d intended to send us a guardian, Master Ryndean? You did more than that. You sent us one of the few beings in the world who had seen more years than our elders, who had gathered more knowledge and wisdom than the oldest of our people. More than that, though, you had sent us someone who possessed something none among the dark elves had.”

And what was that? Ryn asked, sounding hardly like his mood had improved. *Does the ability to breath fire have some merit to sitting on a throne that I am not aware of?*

Impartiality, Ryndean, Arrackes said softly, clearly trying to appease his primordial.

This answer was not one Declan had expected, nor had Ryn from the look on his face. Taking advantage of the momentary pause, Arrackes gestured towards the remainder of the unoccupied chairs.

Let us sit, and I will explain. Colonel—the High Chancellor turned his red gaze to Syr’esh and siblings—*I am afraid I lack sufficient seating for us all. Will you and the ay’abSels’ be comfortable standing, for the time being? This should not take too long.*

“Yes, sir!” the colonel answered at once, his voice steady despite the fact that he, Lysiat, the twins were still more rigid than usual, standing near where Orsik was snorting at a particularly massive book that looked like it might have weighed some twenty pounds.

Excellent. Then if one of you would be so kind as to close the door, I will get started.

As Aliek stepped immediately towards the still-open entrance of the study, Arrackes and the Lord Commander both moved towards chairs. Declan followed their lead, looking pointedly at Ryn as he sat, wishing again that he’d been more diligent in practicing his mind-speech. Still, the urging jerk of his head towards the last—and largest—seat seemed to do the trick, because with a grumble of resignation the dragon followed suite.

There, Ryn said once they were all comfortable, narrowing his white-gold eyes at Arrackes. *Now that we’ve circled the wagons, will you explain yourself?*

Declan almost sighed, wondering if this was really for the best, but the older dragon only nodded as he began to talk.

Your presence alone speaks to the fact that we have much more important things to discuss, so I will be as brief as I can. When you sent us—Shaldora, Tylvenar, and myself—on our respective assignments, I think we can all agree that the southern realms

were in chaos. We dragons were decimated. Humanity had lost most of its army and Elysia al'Dyor had razed Aletha of its greatest noble houses. The er'enthyl, too, were reeling, grieving the loss of the heir of their ruling family.

Arrackes paused briefly, here, waiting until everyone had nodded in assent.

What you may not realize, however, is the fact that the troubles of the Reaches, Viridian, and the Vyr'esh were as nothing to the turmoil happening in Eserysh, Ysenden in particular.

As Declan, Ryn, Bonner, and Ester all frowned at this, as'ahRen took over the explanation.

“While I will not discount the terrible losses suffered by the other races—your kind in particular, Master Ryndean, according to the Chancellor—your fight had come to an end. For the *er'endehn*, however, it was another matter.” The bearded elf leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms and grimacing slightly, as though recalling an unpleasant memory. “On our ascent up here, Magus yr'Essel's apprentice—” he gestured to Declan briefly “—made an observation that even in seven hundred years, we dark elves have not propagated enough children to require our migration out of Ysenden. That is accurate, but not solely because of Sehranya. We were massacred by the Endless Queen, it is true—we lost seventy percent of our population as a whole to her armies before the remnants of the other cities made it here—but we slowed our own expansion after that.”

A mage's apprentice? Is that what you've been told, Ciriak?

Despite the gravity of the story, there was a note of amusement in Arracke's voice as he interrupted the Lord Commander's retelling, his red eyes moving between the elf and Declan, who couldn't help but swallow nervously.

as'ahRen, for his part, shrugged again.

“I'm aware that there is undoubtedly more to the boy, but Master Ryndean made it clear that was a conversation best had elsewhere.”

Fair enough, Arrackes acknowledged, his gaze now lingering on Declan, motioning for the Lord Commander to continue.

“As I was saying,” as'ahRel picked up at once, “the Witch—the ‘Endless Queen’—had played her hand, but our fight was far from over. Ysenden had, very abruptly, become the home of not only its own people, but also the sole surviving haven of cities that had—for centuries before Sehranya's rise—never been less than passively sour towards it, and not-infrequently openly hostile. The dark elves are an often-militant people. Born to the sword, and bred on war. For millennia Ysenden butted heads with the other greater factions of Eserysh. Erraven, Ys'vaal, and Syr'hend, where the family of our own Colonel hails from.” The Lord Commander motioned towards Syr'esh, who did not move despite very likely not understanding a word that was being said about him. “Even as we'd worked to hold at bay the Queen there had been tension, but once our march into the Reaches saw her destroyed, things only got worse.”

Much worse, Arrackes agreed somberly.

Declan could imagine it, and he knew his companions were undoubtedly thinking the same thing. Life-long enemies—*generational* enemies—suddenly enclosed in the same walls, forced to cohabit and collaborate. Even with a common goal as important as ensuring the survival of their race, he knew that such circumstance would have been bound to escalate, and likely eventually erupt.

“The relative peace that followed the war hardly last more than a few years,” as'ahRen said, confirming Declan's deduction. “Within a decade, things had degenerated back into violence, very often even murder. It was a dark time, and one that lasted more than a century. Eventually, the *unspeakable* began to occur, most often in a bid by the other factions to keep Ysenden from staying the dominate presence in our own walls.”

“What was that?” Ester was the one to ask, her green eyes wide as she listened. “What happened?”

The children, Arrackes answered quietly. *The violence began targeting what few children were being born to the er'endehn, all in an attempt by those loyal to the different cities to raise their own banner a little higher than than the others.*

Declan felt his stomach clench uncomfortably, and a flinch of movement in the corner of his vision told him he wasn't the only one to react with such discomfort to this news. Aliek had gripped his spear so tightly the blade had briefly glistened in the light, and Declan thought it must have been hard for ay'ahSels and Syr'esh to be left out of most of the conversation only to be privy to the worst parts.

"Gods..." Bonner was the one to speak up, now, his muttered curse almost a hiss. "How terrible..."

You cannot imagine, Arrackes agreed with a dip of his head towards the mage. Nor, I think—he shifted his gaze to Ryn, now—will you be surprised when I tell you that this was the moment I chose to make myself known to the er'endehn.

Ryn's posture had steadily loosened as he listened, and though he still sat with his scaled arms crossed over his chest, he only sighed as the lesser dragon addressed him.

No. I cannot. It seems I may owe you an apology, Arrackes. He closed his white-gold eyes as though suddenly too tired to keep them open. *Several, in fact. I had not thought I would put you in such a position, when I sent you here.*

Arrackes, though, shook his head. *You owe me no apology. I should have sought an opportunity to reach you and inform you of the developments, even if it meant leaving Ysenden myself for a time. I simply had no idea of where you might be, given the last I knew of you you'd tasked yourself with guarding the younger of the al'Dyor siblings...*

At this point, the older dragon glanced once more in Declan's direction, eyes shining with that same hint of amusement.

No. You did well. Ryn shook his own head as he opened his eyes again. *Aside from the fact that I was hardly in the same place for more than a few years at a time, it transpires that any attempt you might have made to get to Viridian might well have been your demise, old friend.*

Oh? Arrackes frowned, but Ryn only held a hand up to stave any further question.

We will get to that, especially since Colonel Syr'esh—he gestured behind him to the standing elves—had the good sense to bring the ay'ahSels along to fill in any holes in the story. For now, let's just say that crossing the Mother's Tears—Karn's Line, if you prefer—would likely have proven a much more difficult endeavor than even a dragon could have managed, especially on one's own.

Ah. The High Chancellor nodded grimly. *I feared as much when we received word that what could only have been a drey had been spotted near the foot of the mountains. Yes... He seemed to ponder this all for a moment, then let out his own sigh. So long as we get to it eventually, I suppose. Now... Where was I?*

"You were speaking of the murder of the children, Chancellor," the Lord Commander offered in assistance. "In the century after Sehranya's fall."

Ah yes. Arrackes' face hardened. *So I was. That, and my choice to make myself known.* He looked to gather himself for a moment, taking a breath before continuing. *Fortunately for the sake of this tale, the matter is not so complicated. I had been tasked by the sovereign of my kind—he gestured to Ryn—as a protector of the er'endehn as much as an observer. Until that point, the only blood shed had been among soldiers and assassins, and I'd not seen it as my place to intrude on the affairs of the elves. When the actions of the extreme aspects of the factions began threatening the survival of the race by targeting the young, however, it was time to step in.*

"I still recall the day," as'ahRel said with a snort, leaning back and his chair and look up to the ceiling in reminiscence. "The lot of us—the first 'council' we'd cobbled together from the four strongest factions in an attempt to keep the peace—bickering like children over the table as we each sought to place the blame on another. Then the doors are being flung open like they'd been hit by a battering ram, and there is Arrackes, standing in the entrance while the guards we'd set for us outside were still in the process of reach for their weapons."

Things had been escalating for decades, so I'd taught myself the form of one of the Vyr'esh's eagles so that I might hide out in the yr'es for the previous decade or so, Arrackes confirmed. That bit of forest in the middle sanctum you doubtless passed on your way up here. I was considered a curiosity of nature to be fond of—what sort of eagle was grey-and-red with crimson eyes?—so

I was left alone when I occasionally flew through the tunnels to get to know the city. I had the advantage of shock and awe on my side when I took to my rh'eem in front of the guards.

“Even the best soldier is vulnerable to surprise when a damn *dragon* manifests into being not three feet from where they’re standing,” the Lord Commander admitted in a grumble. “He’d appeared and shoved open the doors before anyone had a chance to so much as shout.”

Bonner seemed unable to stop himself from chuckling darkly at all this. “I have to imagine things deescalated quickly, after that?”

They did, Arrackes confirmed. To this day I do not take my assignment lightly. He dipped his head again towards Ryndean. The primordial of my kind had spoken, and so I told the elves of the council in no uncertain terms that I would not allow the destruction of their race.

“Meaning...?” Ester asked like she wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer, and she sank in her chair a little bit when the dragon’s red eyes fell on her.

Meaning that I promised the absolute destruction of any city faction that sought to continue their senseless war, as well as the violent death of the leaders of said group if any more children were harmed as a peace agreement was established. As I said: I do not take my assignment lightly.

The silence that followed this statement was keen, but kept brief by Ryn, who was frowning again.

That was extreme, Arrackes.

It was, the lesser dragon admitted at once, and the sudden tension brought on by his dark words dissipated slightly as his shoulders sagged a little beneath this black robes. *In hindsight, there may have indeed been a better method of approach, but with the bloodshed growing by the day...*

The Lord Commander, however, came to the Chancellor’s defense immediately.

“There was not.” as’ahRen was looking at Ryn as he spoke. “Believe me, Master Ryndean, there was not. We had been at an impasse for years. Decades, truth be told. Ysenden’s individual strength was substantially more than any of the other cities’, but the combine numbers of Erraven, Ys’vaal, and Syr’hend were more than match. We needed an outside force—an *impartial* force.” He stressed the word pointedly as a reminder. “We needed someone who had both the strength to press the factions into line, and the ability to do so without being accused of favoring one city or the other.”

It made sense, Declan had to admit.

“The *er’endebln* don’t possess any magic,” he thought aloud, considering it all. “No matter how strong they are as a martial force, what use would blades being against a dragon’s scales?”

“Exactly.” The old elf gestured his agreement. “At the time, we were limited to steel and iron weapons, just like man and our *er’enthyll* cousins. Perhaps we could have overwhelmed Arrackes if we’d thrown everything we’d had at him, but most of us on the council of the time had been on the cliffs in the last fight against Sehranya. We knew what dragonfire was capable of, and had no intention of crossing it if it could be helped.”

“Limited to steel and iron?” Bonner repeated curiously. “As I recall, you carried black weapons into the Reaches... Are your blades now not the same?”

“Not remotely.” The Lord Commander reached up and unsheathed the weapon strapped over his shoulder, showing it off. The glass-like blade was narrower than the one at Declan’s hip, but shone even in the faded light of the day just the same. “What you saw on the dragons’ cliffs was nothing more than blackened steel, Magus. This, though...” He lifted the weapon before him. “Obsidian, man call’s it, I think. Volcanic glass.”

So it was glass? Declan thought, astounded.

“Not possible,” Bonner answered at once with a frown. “I know of obsidian, sir. It was used by the forefathers of both elves and man for tool making. It can carry an edge unlike any other material, but it is brittle. It would not be able to sustain the sort of impact—”

Regular obsidian, perhaps not, Arrackes interrupted with a weary smile. I am not surprised by your knowledge, Magus... did Ciriak say it was 'yr'Essel' now? Yes, it is true that regular obsidian could hardly hold its form—much less its edge—as a weapon, but the blades you have seen are not crafted from regular obsidian.

“Well then what are they—?”

But Bonner froze mid-question, his eyes moving from the dragon to the blade still bare in the Lord Commander’s hands, then back again. Something seem to click, and his mouth dropped open.

“Now *that’s* interesting...” he muttered at last, not looking away from the weapon now.

“What are you talking about?” Declan asked, the swordsmen in him allowing curiosity to get the the best of his willpower. He’d wondered, of course, at the nature of the incredible blades, but had never hadn’t yet grasped elvish strongly enough to ask Lysiat or the brothers as to their origin.

Bonner pointed at the Lord Commander’s sword as as’ahRen slid it back into his sheath with a smile. “That blasted glass is tempered. Not unlike steel. Obsidian typically forms when magma—like you might find in or around a slumbering volcano, funny enough—is rapidly cooled. It stands to reason that applying a *greater* heat to molten stone before quenching it might produce a harder variation of the glass.”

“A greater heat.” Ester’s laugh was low as she shook her head in disbelief, clearly catching on first. “Like say—theoretically—dragonfire?”

Arrackes and the Lord Commander both offered her a small smile.

Exactly like dragonfire, the High Chancellor said. *But we digress.*

“I don’t think we do,” as’ahRen disagreed, looking to Ryn again. “We have explained how Arrackes came to be known by us, Master Ryndean, but your original question was how he came to become the High Chancellor of Ysenden, was it not?”

It was, Ryn answered, an edge returning to his voice again. *And in that, I have yet to receive a satisfying answer.*

“But you have.” The Lord Commander reached over his shoulder to tap the handle of the sword he’d just stowed. “Our blades are only an example of our reason. And you’ve already seen others. The gondolas. Our armor. Even aspects of our military techniques and lifestyle. When you sent Arrackes here, you offered us a mind which had lived longer than almost any being in the world, and certainly seen more of it than any elf within Ysenden’s walls.”

The obsidian was my idea, Arrackes picked up the explanation. *An experiment related to a curiosity regarding the magma pools that still heat the city. There are caves that make them accessible to those willing to try. Much of the rest, however, came from the world as a whole. He gestured towards Bonner and Declan. Pulley systems and elevators I’d once seen in the Virisian city of Ranhelm, when men and dragons were on better turns. The improvements to armor—his hand drifted to indicate Ester—came from the attire of the elite hunters of Vyr’en, who we would sometimes cross paths with in the southern ridges of the Reaches. There is more, too, much more, from medicine and foodstuff to the practice of thinning parts of the forest, like the woodcutters of man used to do along the western edges of our mountains.*

“It took centuries of work and steady development,” the Lord Commander started again, still watching Ryn, “but what you have seen of Ysenden’s majesty could not have been possible *without* the advice and concepts Arrackes has provided. Eventually, the idea was put forward that the individual who had the greatest ability to effect change in the city should be the one governing it, and the council—the majority of them, at least—agreed. Eserysh as a whole has always been the land of the *er’endehn*, so we have never had a law requiring the discrimination of another race’s participation in society. As a result—”

As a result, there were no true barriers to putting forth a dragon’s name in Ysenden’s elections. Ryn sounded almost tired as he finished for the elf, nodded and bringing a clawed hand up to run at one temple. And they accepted this? The council? The people?

“Again, there was certainly protest,” as’ahRen admitted with a shrug. “Particularly from those officers of the council who’d held loftier positions in the cities of their birth and wished to see a return of that power.

May'lek ed'Vyn had been the actual High Councilor of Ys'vaal before its fall. General Syr'esh—" he glanced apologetically at the colonel by the wall despite the language barrier that barred the younger elf from understanding him "—had been a member of the ruling family of Syr'hend, and held my position as Lord Commander there. A far cry from the overseer of the city guard he has been for four hundred years now. The old sisters Ylva and Elva Ke'reen had shared a similar position beneath the Chancellor of Erraven, though they've both long-since passed." as'ahRen's brow furrowed. "Regardless, the remainder of the council largely saw the value in the proposition."

And the people? Ryn asked again. Given where we are sitting, I must assume they, too, were eventually swayed?

"Not eventually," the Lord Commander answered with a laugh. "Immediately. There was additional dissent, yes—from the parts of the other cities who hated being governed by Ysenden, much less a being who wasn't even *of their own race*—but this was some four centuries after the Witch's fall. Most of the old guard—the ones who truly remembered their former homes—had either died away or grown too old to raise any protest, leaving the younger generation to make their own choice. And in the end—having seen Arrackes achieve what he had in the span of their lifetime—they made it." He waved to the room around them as though to say "and so here we are".

"And have continued to make it since, apparently," Bonner added, looking around the study dutifully. "I was made to understand that the *er'endehn* elect their council every ten years, and their High Chancellor every fifty?"

I see now why your... ah... 'apprentice' is so well-informed, Magus. Arrackes didn't look at Declan this time, but there was the definite hint of a smile in the corner of his mouth as he spoke. Yes. The people of the city have been so gracious as to elevate me every half-century since, to my great honor.

"Like they have a better option," the Lord Commander snorted. "Who do you expect they would want to take your place, after everything you've done? Me? Syr'esh? The rest of us are warmongers. Unfit to wear the mantle."

As always, you fail to acknowledge your own abilities beyond the sword, Ciriak, Arrackes answered with a sigh. Then though, his red eyes were on Ryn again, then moving from him to Bonner and Ester in turn before settling on Declan. Now, however, is not the time to rehash that particular argument. I know this is all much to take it, but if we have even satisfied you for the time being with this explanation, then perhaps we can address the more pressing matter?

Despite the fact that the old dragon was looking at Declan like he was trying to see *through* him, it was obvious who Arrackes had been addressing. Sure enough, Ryn shifted in his seat, leaning back to place his elbows on the arms of the chair before interlocking his clawed fingers.

I have more questions on the subject, but they can wait, he consented after a moment, nodding himself towards Declan. By the way you are staring at Declan, am I to assume you've figured out who he is?

At these words, as'ahRel frowned and turned to take Declan in for himself, looking him up and down again with even greater interest than he had on the gondola.

I have my suspicions, given his ring, Arrackes answered, and Declan saw the dragon's crimson eyes dip to the signet on his left hand before he thought they lost focus as the High Chancellor extended his senses. I can only faintly make it out, though.

"And what is it we're supposed to be 'making out'?" as'ahRel asked sidelong of his master.

Arrackes smirked slightly. *For you to experience it would require a seed of magic you unfortunately lack, old friend. I doubt even Ryndean can feel the energy, young as he is.*

I am not so young as I once was, Arrackes, Ryndean said in half-a-growl, but the lesser dragon waved the comment aside with a lazy hand.

Of course. I imagine you are as much changed as any of us in the time since the war, if not more. Still, you yet count your life in centuries, not millennia. Are you going to claim you can sense it?

Ryn hesitated, glaring at the High Chancellor before answering curtly.

No, I suppose I won't.

Arrackes nodded, obviously having expected the answer. *It is unsurprising. Your primordial's blood strengthens your ability, but it does not hone your skill. That is something only time can wet, I'm afraid.*

"I ask again, then, as naught but a humble elf uninitiated in the grandest arts of the secrets of the dragons," as'ahRen interrupted before Ryn could speak again, sarcasm dripping from every word. "What is it I am *not* supposed to be making out, then?"

"A blood of Kings." It was Bonner who answered the Lord Commander, clearly as intent as the elf on keeping the conversation from deteriorating. "A particular set of gifts handed down through the generations of Declan's family."

'Handed down' might not be accurate, Magus, Arrackes said, turning to look between the mage and Declan again. As far as I am aware, Tyrennus intended this power to be lent to a single man and his sister, not meant to be passed along. It does not happen with the hatchlings of the primordials themselves, for example.

Were he still here, Tyrennus would say that it appears mankind's tether to the magic of their sires is less finicky, Ryn cut in.

Probably. The High Chancellor chuckled, and looked squarely at Declan. *You are fortunate to have such a guardian, apprentice. The majority of our kind might well have slaughtered the first child of Amherst al'Dyor in the crib to keep our magics our own.*

Declan opened his mouth, about to cut Ryn off as the dragon bared his teeth in anger by stating very clearly that he *did* appreciate his fortune, when as'ahRen took to his feet with a jolt.

There was a ringing silence as the Lord Commander stood there without saying a word, his carved features suddenly hard, staring down at Declan. After a moment the elf's white-red eyes started searching his face, then his shoulders, arms, and hands. as'ahRel frowned, clearly not finding what he was looking for, before finally speaking.

"You said your family name was 'Idrys', boy..."

Declan thought it best, in that moment, to get to his own feet, though he stood a great deal more slowly than the Lord Commander.

"It is, sir. And if you're searching for signs of Amherst al'Dyor in my features, I doubt you will find any. Seven hundred hundred years may not be more than a handful of generations among the *er'endebn*, but it is ten lifetimes of a blessed man and four times than many births for us. I am a long, *long* way separated from your former student, Lord Commander, and I certainly claim nothing more."

For the first time since they'd walked into the room, Arrackes looked the slightest bit surprised, one scaled brow rising in interest.

'Student'? Did you mentor the crown prince, Ciriak?

"He wasn't the crown prince," the Lord Commander said over his shoulder, still not looking away from the Declan. "His sister, Elysia, was the heir. But yes, I did, and to this day I've yet to find a pupil with same combination of drive and talent, even among the *er'endebn*. What he lacked in our natural ability he made up for twice over with hunger and a little bit of magic." He addressed Declan again, his gaze hardening. "You tread in dangerous waters if you profess to be the descended of Amherst al'Dyor, boy."

There is nothing to profess, Lord Commander. Ryn's voice was chilly as he spoke from his chair. *It is simply a fact. Declan is the only living progeny of Herst's—Amherst's, if you would prefer—eldest line. He is the son of a man who was the eldest of the oldest daughter of the eldest son of his own family, etcetera, etcetera. Seven hundred years I have been watching over this line. Declan—the dragon didn't look away from as'ahRen as he spoke—show him the ring.*

Dutifully, Declan lifted his left hand, displaying of the ornate silver ban about his middle finger, the black stone set within etched with the crowned stag and shield of the al'Dyors. The Lord Commander looked at it, frowning for a moment, then winced as—Declan assumed—Ryn lifted the cognitive magics that had likely hidden the truth of the signet's shape from the elf's eyes until that moment. Apparently as'ahRen was not unaccustomed to such weaves, because he made no comment on the sensation. Instead, he froze, the hardness of his features softening once more to interest as he took in the ring.

The *exact* ring that would have rested about Amherst's al'Dyor's finger, even when the *er'endeahn* had been the prince's instructor so many centuries before...

"I would know myself, then," he said eventually, bobbing his head at the sword on Declan's hip. "You and I will cross blades, Declan Idrys, and we will see if you are truly your forefather's heir."

Declan felt his hands tingle at this, though he had trouble deducing if this was more due to terror at the proposition or thrill at the opportunity. From behind the Lord Commander, Ryn straighten as though about to say something more, but Declan stopped him with a hand.

"I would take you up on that honor gladly, Lord Commander, and soon." He had to work to mask his enthusiasm as he offered the man a brief bow. "Now, however, is not the time, unfortunate as that is. For whatever reason, my 'King's blood' has proven more of a curse than a blessing in this last half year. It's why Commander ay'ahSel and her brothers stumbled across us crossing the threshold into your lands, in fact." He gesture to the still-waiting elves at this, who continued to stand motionless despite the fact that Orsik and Eyera both looked to have grown tired of exploring the study, and had settled down the sleep on either side of the line of the four silent *er'endeahn*.

"Oh? And what do you mean by that, boy?"

"He means we are being hunted, sir," Ester said plainly before anyone could speak up. "He means Sehranya has been hounding us since the day Declan saved me from being a meal for one of your 'winged'. The drey."

The Lord Commander's stiffened, and he turned to the half-elf.

"I assume this is the part where you tell me what happened to the other hundred soldiers who should have returned with you today?" he asked quietly.

"Wights," she answered bluntly. "Probably more than ten-score."

And eight times than many more at least lying in wait not two-day's march from here, Ryn added as the Lord Commander blinked in surprise at this news.

"What?!" the elf demanded, whirling on the dragon this time. Before he or Arrackes could say another word, though, it was Bonner's turn to speak up.

"Oh it get's worse, as'ahRel. Much worse." The old mage grimaced. "We also have good reason to believe there are those among the *er'endeahn* who are already aware of this, and likely have been for some time..."

A heavy silence followed this, in which even Arrackes finally began to look alarmed.

A traitor? The High Chancellor finally asked, watching Bonner intently. *Among the er'endeahn? We are aware that there might be at least one turncoat on the council, but we assumed the betrayal was to the benefit of one of the other city factions. What elf would betray their kind to the Queen?*

"To that, I cannot answer yet," the mage said with a shake of his head. "But we equally cannot discount the likelihood. However it is that Sehranya has dragged herself out of the grave again, she has proven more cunning and level-head this time around then when last she sought to take hold of the world. Even seven hundred years ago she attempted to take advantage of the war between man and the dragons. We cannot say she isn't doing the same thing now."

Arrackes and as'ahRel glanced at each other at this, both suddenly very tense.

“A spy for the Witch...” the Lord Commander eventually said, not looking away from the High Chancellor. “Within our own ranks... How did it come to this?”

It came to this because, those seven hundred years ago, man allowed his ego to supersede the needs of our combined peoples. It was Ryn who answered. In doing so, he not only nearly allowed Sebranya to take hold of the world, but placed the wedges between our kinds that have only driven deeper with time. The tension between humanity and the er'enthyl. The absence of the dragons. The self-exile of the er'endehn. We cannot allow this to continue. Above all else—above whatever it costs—this time we must come together, or risk the Endless Queen succeeding where she once failed.

as'ahRen, who had turned to listen as Ryn spoke, nodded slowly at this, clearly seeing reason in the dragon's words. Beyond him, however, Declan couldn't help but notice the frown that had creased Arrackes' scaled face, the first sign of the displeasure the High Chancellor had shown since their arrival.

That doesn't bode well, he thought, eyeing the lesser dragon in concern.

It was, fortunately, the Lord Commander who spoke first.

“And how would you suggest we accomplish that, Master Ryndean? The *er'endehn* are not what we once were, and it has been more than half-a-milena since we had contact with humanity. I wouldn't be surprised if they've forgotten we exist.”

“They have,” Declan found himself answering, looking away from Arrackes to the elf. “I can attest to that myself.”

The Lord Commander nodded like he had expected this. “Then that complicates matters.”

“It doesn't, and it does not.” Bonner spoke up again, leaning back on his chair to thrum thoughtfully at the wooden arms by his side.

“Oh?” The elf looked to him expectantly.

“I won't pretend that humanity's lack of awareness won't make things difficult, but the fact of the matter is that one can hardly deny for too long the existence of something they can see with their own eyes. If it comes to it, the presence of the dark elves on the battlefield will smooth out that confusion quickly enough. More importantly, however—” Bonner glanced briefly at Ryn, as though seeking his assistance in what he said next “—the pieces for the alliance of our kinds—of *all* our kinds—are already in place, and have been for a very long time.”

Declan saw it again, then. The deepening of Arrackes' frown was so obvious that even Ester glanced at the older dragon in concern.

Once more, however, it was as'ahRel who took the lead.

“Explain,” he told Bonner slowly. “How am I not aware of this, if it involves the *er'endehn*?”

Because seven centuries ago you and your soldiers wanted so little to do with the other races that you left the Reaches the moment the war was done. Ryn's voice was firm, but gentle, neither placing blame nor forgiving. You denied us the opportunity to beg your involvement in our plan—in Igoric al'Dyor's plan, rather, though he'd already been slain by the time Sebranya fell. I am a little disappointed, however— the dragon looked to Arrackes questioningly “—*why you have apparently not been informed of it since.*”

The High Chancellor, for his part, stayed quiet, his jaw clenched in what Declan would almost have called disapproval. It was clear Arrackes knew what was coming, but whether due to his primordial's presence or an obligation to let as'ahRen hear it all for himself, he said nothing.

Bonner was quick to take advantage.

“Lord Commander,” he asked of the elf, “have you ever heard of ‘the Accord of Four’...?”