

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

PLACEHOLDER TEXT.

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While she didn't take hold of him again as they moved, Ester walked so close Declan at his side that they bumped shoulders almost every other step. Ordinarily he suspected he might have found this proximity distracting—his heart had nearly leapt into his throat for joy when he'd found himself wrapped in her arms, even if she *had* tackled him to the ground—but for once Declan's attention was on everything other than the beautiful half-elf he was thrilled to stand beside once more.

He imagined, in a way, that what he was feeling was not unlike the wonder Ester herself had experienced when they'd shown her the streets of Raneln for the first time...

It wasn't that there was all that much going on in the tight quarters formed by the neatly rowed black-and-gold tents of the *er'endebn* camp. Truth be told there couldn't have been more than two hundred soldiers moving around them in total, and Declan had seen enough campaigns in his time not to be wowed by such a minimal force. It was rather, *how* things were going on in camp that awed him so, as well as the place itself.

While the tents had seemed unadorned and unimpressive from the other side of the lake, on closer inspection Declan found that they were—like the armor of the elves—in fact meticulously decorated, but only in a fashion someone with a human's eyes could see from proximity. While simple in design, the dark cloth of the footsoldiers' tents were lined with gold threading that gleamed even in the dim light of the day. The bodies of them, too, were stitched with thin patterns and motifs in the same color, like faint painting across stretched black canvas. It took him studying several such structures to realized the symbol was the same on each of the tent walls, and he decided at last that the sword and bow was very likely the emblem of Ysenden itself.

There was more, too, though. Delicate iron sconces—unlit in the daylight—were staggered here and there along the walking paths, and every three tents a brazier was aglow, each one three feet wide and constructed of what looked almost to have been metal leaves arranged like a blooming floor. As they passed the fourth or fifth of these, Declan was astounded to see one tending soldier put a boot on the top of the arrangement and, with what seemed minimal pressure, collapse the entire thing in and onto itself, sealing off the dying embers within at once without so much as a spark.

"That would explain the lack of smoke," Declan muttered to himself as they moved by, watching the soldier in question turn and start to berate another who—if he had to guess—had accidentally brought back wet wood from the forest.

This incident, however, was clearly the exception rather than the rule, because the camp otherwise seemed to work with the precisions of the finely crafted pocket watches one could find the high-end storefronts of the larges of Aletha's markets. Despite the small number of soldiers, everywhere he looked Declan saw movement, whether it was elves patrolling the lines in pairs, or groups looking to be coming and going from the Vyr'esh with supplies and foodstuff. There were, however, very few shouts and calls over the tents, as he would have expected form even this smaller camp. Rather, the bustle of activity flowed in and around itself, the soldiers going about even the most basic tasks with a deliberate focus, largely lacking in distraction and mistake or collision despite the tightness of the quarters. Only the nine of them crossing through at a good clip appeared a sufficient enough oddity to draw attention away from assignments, and even then the disturbance appeared brief. Funny enough, it was on *him* that Declan discovered most eyes fell, then on Ryn, then Orsik and Eyera. Ester, it appeared, was nothing short of invisible to the soldiers of the *er'endebn*, and for some reason they seemed to find the presence of a human among their mix more curious than a dragon.

"Same as in the tunnels..." Declan mumbled to himself, frown as a duo of patrolling soldiers watched him go by with narrowed eyes, gazes only slicing to Ryn briefly, then Orsik and Eyera as they passed.

"Hm?" Ester asked him at his side, looking up at him.

“Ryn,” Declan said in answer, speaking quietly as he nodded to their friend’s scaled back in front of them. “I don’t care *what* kind of training these soldiers are put through. You’d think a bloody *dragon* walking through the middle of their camp would cause a buzz, but they all seem more perplexed that *I’m* here.”

Ester grunted in agreement. “Same as the mountain, yeah,” she echoed. “I’ve been digging at the same thing a bit with the ay’ahSel brothers, but they won’t say a word about it. It’s like they’re used to him.”

“Maybe they are?” Declan offered. “Ryn has one of his dragons in Ysenden, doesn’t he? What was his name?”

“Arrackes.” Ester answered, but shook her head as they all took a turn down a wider mainly that seemed to cut through the center of the camp. “But that wouldn’t explain *this* would it? If he’s the only dragon in Ysenden—even if he’s living there openly—would *every* soldier have spent enough time in his presence not to make some kind of fuss about it?”

Declan shrugged. “Probably not, but I don’t have a better ideas...”

“Maybe there’s more than one? It’s been a long time since Ryn’s been back to the Reaches, hasn’t it? Maybe some of them left the mountains and took up with the elves.”

“Plausible,” Declan agreed, though he had his doubts. “As plausible as anything else, at least.”

Before Ester could continued to theorize, though, they reached the edge of the lake shore, their narrow line stepping out onto a marginally wider sloth of open sand to spread out a little as ahead of them y’Rhel held up a hand to indicate that they hold up. All eight of them stopped short—Orsik and Eyera sniffing at the corners of the nearest tents on either side of them as they did—and Declan had to stop himself from whistling as the major vanished into the middle of the three pavilions staked at the frozen edge of the water before them.

In addition to being larger than the footsoldier’s tents, the trio of quarters before them were also marginally more decorative, and more sturdily built. The wood butts of narrow lats and ribs extended from the four corners of the pointed canvas roofs, each carved with with handsome, subtle patterns. The entrances were grander as well, the two smaller flanking pavilions ascended with gold draping over their single-flap doors, while the larger center one had a two-flap access that was itself woven with spiraling patterns. Unfortunately Declan had only just started trying to make out the shapes of the threading—a pair of wolves, he thought—before one side of this entrance opened to reveal y’Rhel again, motioning them to enter.

“The animals, too?” Declan joked with a snort as the three ay’ahSel made for the open flap at once.

Ryn, who had come to stand on Ester’s other side as they waited, shook his head with a bit of a smile. “We can leave them. I only had them follow to push her buttons.”

“Good for you,” Ester said with a dry laugh, stepping forward to lead the way.

“Orsik. Eyera.” Declan looked around at the warg, who turned their broad heads in his direction at the sound of their names. “Stay put. We won’t be long.”

While the female blinked at him blankly, the male gave of a grunt that might have been understanding before returning to his sniffing. Smiling to himself, Declan hurried to catch up to Ryn, who had followed on Ester’s heels and was already ducking to step into the pavilion.

Stepping in behind the dragon, Declan found himself blinking in pleasant surprise as he took in the interior of the large tent. While they space was more black and gold, just as he’d expected, it was much more brightly lit than he would have thought, illuminated—unexpectedly—by several lines of moonwing lantern that hung from the wooden lats over their heads. A comfortably thick carpet padded the sand under their boots, and another brazier—just like the others he’d noticed outside—took up the center of the largely-open space, the gentle flames of the smoldering pile of embers within casting off enough heat that he felt it through his own weave of warmth. To one side of the the interior, a single cot was strong up, while on the other several crates stacked with wide, rolled-up lengths of parchment had been carefully organized. Declan wondered only briefly what the scrolls were, because before them—on the other side of the brazier—a small group of gathered figures were standing around a broad folding table, bent over what could only have been several maps weighed down at the corners. About a half-dozen elves made up the majority of the congregation, and while Declan couldn’t tell at a glance what rank this grouping of *er’endehn* held, he knew by the stiffness of the ay’ahSel’s posture that they were likely in the presence of the camps highest officers.

Them, and short, bald man dressed in plain looking robes patterned now in myriad shades of brown, white, and green to match the winter pallet of the world outside.

“Declan!” Bonner boomed the moment the two of them met eyes, a broad grin splitting his beaded beard. Stepping away from the table, the old man practically sprinted around the brazier, brushing past y’Rehl without so much as a glance to reach Declan and take him firmly by both arms. “Welcoming *back!* And here I was starting to think I’d have to start looking for another handsome bachelor for Ester before long!”

“Hello, Bonner,” Declan answered genially, smiling down at the mage even as Ester squared in protest at his elbow. “Sadly you won’t get rid of my that easily. You and Ryn have tought me too well.”

“Of course we have!” Bonner chuckled patting Declan’s arms fondly once before looking to the dragon himself. “Where did you find him? Or *them*, rather, I see.” He seemed to have just noticed Lysiat ay’ahSel, his cheer dimming a little as his green eyes went to the bandages one could still make under under her helm. “I count two of the three...”

Orisk is outside, don’t worry, Ryn assured him. *And about a half-day’s ride east of us as the crow flies. Well within the Vyr’esh’s borders.*

“So close?” Bonner looked surprised as he turned to Declan again. “I was worried those passages would take you further away that that, lad.”

“They did,” Declan said with a bit of a pained expression. “ay’ahSel and I have been in the woods for four days, now. Five, actually, counting today. The tunneler caught us a little under a week after we split you lot, just as we found an exit. After we dealt with that, it was just a matter of tracking west again, hoping we’d run into you or your trail eventually. That’s how Ryn found us.”

“The ‘tunneler?’” Bonner echoed, looking perplexed. His confusion only lasted a moment, though, before his eyes went wide. “Oh! *Oh!* You saw it?! The beast?! And you dealt with it?! How?! What was it?! An annelid?!”

“A-a what?” Declan stammered, half-laughed at the barrage of questions.

“A annelid?!” the old man exclaimed. “A tubular invertebrate, like an earthworm! It certainly *seemed* like a annelid! From the glimpse I caught of it, but the *size* of that thing! How on earth did you manage to—?!”

There was sharp, stern cough, and Bonner shut up at once, half-turning to look back across the pavilion with a guilty smile.

“Ah... uh... *Syel, Syr’esh Hal*,” he said a little sheepishly, seeming to address one of the dark elf officers in particular who stood on the far side of the map table. “*Ul’ves veben.*”

Luckily for Declan, Ester had clearly already been ready to act as his interpreter for the purposes of this meeting, because she quietly turned her father’s words for him at once.

“Apologies, Colonel Syr’esh. My friends have returned.”

In answer, the dark