

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“Do not let yourself be fooled by their grace and their haughty air. Elves are just a capable of spite and bitterness as man, if not more.”

- Zyl'eht Yrhst, High Chancellor of Erraven,
date unknown

“Unforgivable!” General Sen'Hev, commander of Ysenden's forward scouts, snarled as she slammed an angry fist down the the long council table before her. *“First you trespass into our lands, violating our blatant desire to be left alone, and then accuse us of betraying our own people to the Witch?! Unforgivable!”*

Lessan, Arrackes said in warning. Calm yourself. I have already stated that Ryndean and his companions are welcomed guests of the city, so there has been no trespass. By any of them.

His pointed last words were clearly necessary, because from around the table there came more than one scathing glance or frown of disapproval scattered among the twenty generals of Ysenden that made up the city's council.

“Chancellor,” Sen'Hev hissed insistently. *“You have said yourself that two of them are mages! And one a former court magus of the realm of man! Surely you understand how this city will feel at being forced to host such corruption within our—!”*

“Enough, General.” It was the Lord Commander this time, who spoke, his tone less forgiving than Arrackes'. *“This council's fear of magic is not without reason, but we are er'endehn. Since when do we all fear to guide our thoughts and decisions?”*

There was, for the first time in several minutes, a tense pause in the conversation, and Ester took the opportunity to draw in an unsteady breath from where she stood behind the High Chancellor's chair at Declan's right, between him and her father, with Ryn looming over all at his left. It had been well over an hour, now, since the meeting had commenced, and she was starting to think that if the dark elves debated every decision with this amount of fervor, it was unlikely they could have functioned for long as a society.

After Arrackes and Lord Commander as'ahRel had explained how it was the dragon had come to be the leader of the *er'endehn*, it had been Ester, Declan, Ryn, and her father's turn to tell their own tale. They'd started from the very beginning, when Declan and Ryn had saved her from the gruesome scene that had turned out to be a drey's feeding ground, and the full retelling had taken no small part of the day's grey afternoon. At Ryn's encouragement they'd skipped no details, hiding nothing from the lesser dragon and his second. They told them of the attack by the ghouls, then the drey, of their flight through Ranheln, and the ambush by the wights that had them deciding north, beyond the Mother's Tears, was the only viable option left to them. They told them of the horde of wereyn that were likely currently waiting out the winter in the husk of Sevyllle, the mining town due north of Aletha, after a fall spent razing the northern valley towns of Viridian. They told the butchery and burning ruins that were all that had remained of Elghen, of their ascent into the mountains, then their fall and journey into the dark. From there, it was the ay'ahSels who had taken over, all three of them explaining their assault on the drey that had arguable saved Ester's, Declan's, Ryn's, and her father's lives, along with Orsik's and Eyera's, as well as the choice to take the lot of them 'prisoner' until a decision could be made as to what to do with the group. They spoke of the tunneler's attack, and from there the story had split where Aliek and Tesied had led Ryn, Ester and her father, and Eyera from the mountains, while Lysiat told of her and Declan's journey deeper into bowels of the earth.

When they'd reached Declan's costly defeat of the undead worm, as'ahRel let out an impressed whistle, but otherwise he and the High Chancellor had stayed quiet throughout the story.

Only after the ay'ahSels—and Colonel Syr'esh, now—had gotten to the end of their recounting, telling the pair of the ambush by the wights that had decimated the forward unit—and their subsequent realization that the draugr could only have come from Eraven—did either the Lord Commander or dragon speak.

“*Spirits take us...*” as'ahRen had hissed as he'd heard this, slipping into elvish before catching himself and shifting to common again for Declan. “All of them? You're sure? Every exile we've cast out?”

We have to assume so, Ryn had answered. *As we have to assume this was very possibly part of a larger plan.*

Whose? Arrackes had asked. *Whose plan?*

“Whoever it is who has been stirring the pot of rebellion in Ysenden these last years,” Declan had told them, then. “Is the timing of such an escalation after so many centuries, all while Sehranya *also* invades Viridian, not too convenient to be coincidence...?”

It hadn't taken much to convince the pair after that, especially when Syr'esh and all three ay'ahSel siblings swore on the banner of the city that the wights could only have come from Erraven, dressed as most of them had been. From there, Arrackes hadn't delayed in calling the Chancellor's council to order, summoning every general in Ysenden to a chamber the dragon and the Lord Commander had guided Ester and the others to themselves, on the same level as the study. Orsik and Eyera had been told to stay in the library—under the wary eye of the ay'ahSels—and so it was that Ester, Declan, Ryn, and her father found themselves keeping their own company again for the first time in what felt like years.

Or at least they would have been, had half of the council not been watching them in dubious concern while the other half lashed out with open hostility.

“*With all due respect, Lord Commander,*” an aged elf with a narrow white beard whose name Ester didn't know yet spoke up from the far end of the table, “*I do not think it 'fear' that feeds these concerns of ours. I would rather call it 'experience'.*” Despite the general's steady tone, his eyes were narrowed as he turned his attention to Declan and Ester's father. “*The last time we had any dealings with the magics of man, we paid the price in hundreds of thousands of lives lost. Would we not be wise to hesitate carrying on with such interactions again?*”

At Ester's right, her father grumbled something inaudible under his breath, though she thought she caught the words “waste of a good chair” among the mutterings.

Closer to their end of the table, Arrackes gave a sigh and leaned back, gesturing as he did over his shoulder. *Believe me, Beh'lys, that few in the world can appreciate the horror of Sehranya's power as much a dragon. Ryndean and I—he gestured over his shoulder to where Ryn stood motionless as he translated everything for Declan privately—saw our kind unmade, then stitched back together into monsters specifically crafted to be our bane. I am not unsympathetic to your mistrust. I am merely frustrated in the fact that it is misguided, and misplaced. This man—he gestured this time with his other hand to Bonner—is not your enemy. Far from.*

“*But how can you know that, sir?*” a younger elf, perhaps half the age of most of the others seated about the table, was glaring through the open slots of the black helmet he had chosen not to take off when he'd sat. “*In truth? How do we know that this tale they have spun for you is not some fallacy dredged up to trick us?*”

“*Oh, for god's sake.*” Ester's father had finally had enough, his gaze knife-like as it settled on the younger general. “*Get your head out of your arse, boy. We have trudged through blood and fire alike to bring you these tidings, and it is tiresome to hear your doubts weigh your swords.*”

“*Boy?*” the general repeated in a snarl, shoving himself to his feet before anyone could stop him. “*You prove yourself as much a fool as a charlatan, human. I have lived for four hundred years, and have likely seen more death on my blade than the entirety of your company combined.*”

Oh, well played, Father, Ester thought as she saw the man's expression abruptly shift into a cunning smile in the corner of her vision. On her left, Declan suddenly raised a hand as though to cough into, hiding his own grin as Ryn turned the words for him.

“Four hundred years would put you at half my age, boy.” Ester could tell her father was barely containing his enjoyment as he emphasized the repeated word. *“Your assumptions at the abilities of mankind prove you the fool, I’m afraid.”* As the younger general’s face slacked in disbelief, however, the mage turned his attention to the rest of the table. *“As for whether or not I am some agent of the Endless Queen—your ‘Witch’—I have to call myself insulted.”*

“Because you think so highly of your position that you believe yourself more than her tool?” General Sen’Hev asked mockingly.

Because he was one of the two mages who personally saw Sebranya’s ashes cast off the cliffs of my homeland.

Arrackes words came like the warning rumble of distant thunderclouds, low and absolute. Glancing at him, Ester saw that the dragon seemed indeed to be at last running out of patience, his red eyes intent on the scout commander.

Bonner yr’Essel and I met for the first time today, true, but we have crossed paths before. He continued, and the weight of his voice seemed to lay like lead over the entirety of the room. *He and Elysia al’Dyor finished the war that claimed those hundreds of thousands of lives the er’endehn still pine for. Those of you who stood on those cliffs should recall the fight, and the firestorm that brought it to an end. That was Magus yr’Essel’s and his pupil’s doing, and I will swear so to every individual ear within the walls of this city if need be.*

Another pause, and Ester didn’t miss many of the expressions shifting around the table, some slipping away from fury to grudging respect, while a few older faces briefly showed true interest before settling into the typical emotionless mask of the elves.

Arrackes let the silence hang a moment, this time, before speaking again.

Good. It seems that finally knocked some self-awareness into the lot of you. Every moment we waste going in circles here is a moment this reborn Queen has to solidify her position in Eserysb. With that in mind—and if we are done delaying—there are two matters that need be addressed.

When no one spoke out against him again, the dragon nodded to the Lord Commander at his right.

“First and foremost—” as’ahRen started up at once, speaking loud and clear *“—there is the matter of the potential traitor in our midst. If Viridian is under assault, it casts a different light on the uprisings we have been suffering these last years.”*

Ester caught the barest hint of annoyance at the word “uprising” on a few faces, but no one said a word cross-wise as the Lord Commander continued.

“It pains me to say it, but no one can be beyond suspicion for the time being, which is why I am instituting a temporary two-handed policy for the members of this council. You will each be assigned a pairing, with both parties’ approval being required on any and all major decisions made in the immediate future.”

No one so much as blinked at this, which told Ester the council was—at the very least—taking the matter seriously.

“It is, of course, unlikely that the traitorous element is limited to this room, if it is even present here at all.” The Lord Commander continued. *“For that reason, a full-scale investigation of every tier of our standing force will be initiated, which I will be personally overseeing, barring some necessary delegation. General Syr’esh.”* as’ahRel leaned forward to look down the table. *“As commander of the city guard, I am charging you with investigating your own house, as well as the residents of the city not a part of the standing army. Is this agreeable?”*

From his place closer to the middle of the council, the general who had greeted them at the gates of Ysenden—*undoubtedly* Kellek Syr’esh’s father, now that Ester had a chance to get a good look at the broad-shouldered elf—nodded as he spoke.

“It is. If I may make a request, however, regarding your ‘two-handed’ policy: I would ask that I be paired with General Rynnus.” He gestured across the table to a thin woman in plain black-and-orange robes who had one hand on the table, index finger toying with a large gold ring that encircled her thumb as she listened. She, Ester had noted, was among those who’d expressed no true reaction to their presence, which was immediately explained as Syr’esh continued. *“If I am to investigate the populace, it would be best if I worked closely with the spymaster. She is of*

Ysenden's line, and is therefore extremely unlikely to have betrayed us. Our partnership would be of great assistance in the work I will need to undergo, and would at the same time address any potential concern of an improper investigation if I were suspected of treachery."

The Lord Commander pondered this for a moment, then looked to Arrackes. The dragon nod his assent, and as'ahRen turned back to the guard commander.

"A good thought. Yl'ab." He addressed the silent spymaster. *"Do you harbor any concerns?"*

"None, sir." The elf's voice was surprisingly deep given her slender appearance, and she drew her hand into her lap as she dipped her head respectfully towards the head of the table. *"I have worked with General Syr'esh before on similar matters, and he is correct: I am among the least likely to be the betrayer, given that I was born within these walls. If anything I think it speaks to his capability that he has already thought the value of our pairing through."*

"Done, then," the Lord Commander said, rapping the knuckles of one hand against the table to mark the end of the conversation before looking around. *"The rest of you will be assigned your pairings before the end of the day. Now, onto the other matter: this council needs to decide what is to be done about Erraven."*

Ester thought she could have guessed, by the minute shifting of bodies in chairs, then, which of the present officers carried Erraven blood in their veins. There weren't more than three or four—the bearded "Beh'lys" among them—but faces darkened in general around the table at as'ahRen's word.

It was General Syr'esh who broke the tension first as he spoke again.

"I can start with a positive update: there are currently no prisoners set for exile, so that need not be a concern."

"Good," as'ahRen said with a nod, and Ester thought the elf might have looked relieved. *"We should pray to the spirits it stays that way."*

"Personally, I would recommend a dissemination of the... suspected situation in Erraven to the general populace." Another younger general, his white hair shone nearly to his scalp, spoke up. By his hesitation stating the facts it was clear the elf still had his doubts about the verity of the information, but his skepticism was not enough to go against Arrackes' and the Lord Commander's sworn words. *"We have been lenient with the dissenters for long enough as is. An exile from Ysenden was of little deterrent when they knew they would be hailed as heroes upon reaching the ruins of the old city. If we spread word that Erraven is not the haven they thought it to be, we may see a hesitation in their willingness to act, at least in the immediate short-term."*

"Two birds with one stone," General Syr'esh spoke up yet again, nodding thoughtfully before looking up the table. *"I would second this. Kases is correct. There's no need to concern ourselves with where prisoners are going to go if we can make it that we have no prisoners, at least for a time. If we can achieve a lull in the rebels' actions by announcing the situation to the masses, it would also reduce the burden my men have been carrying, which will be important if we end up deploying the army to deal with Erraven."*

"Is that the intention?" Beh'lys asked, looking around the table despite clearly addressing the question to Arrackes and as'ahRen. *"To raze the city again? There is still a history there, I would remind you, and bad blood lingers. If we were to trample across the graves of the lost to Sebranya in the last war, we risk—"*

A wizened elf with a scar cutting almost horizontally across her forehead interrupted the general from the end of the council. *"If we do not see the wights eradicated—not to mention what other spirit-forsaken corruption might hide within those walls—then we may well have many more graves to dig before the winter is out. History has merit, but we number too few to place its value above the good of Ysenden."*

"Particularly after having lost more than a hundred souls already to the creatures," a tall elf with a soft face added from the other side of the table.

Beh'lys, though, wasn't willing to be cowed.

"That is an easy thing for the blood of Ysenden to say," he growled. *"It is not so simple for those of us whose families are buried beneath the rubble of that Erraven."*

Ester watched then—with a mixture of exasperation and irritation—as the confrontation erupted from there. Other officers spoke up to support or scorn Beh'lys, while a few who she thought to be of Ysenden's line even stood up from their chairs in anger. The meeting devolved into a shouting match in seconds, and Arrackes started to stand, clearly intent on diffusing the situation.

A clawed hand on his robed shoulder kept him in his seat.

ENOUGH!

While the older dragon's early impatience had rung with a threatening weight, Ryn's snarled word bore an entirely different—almost physical—pressure. Had she not been accustomed to hearing his voice inside her head, Ester thought her knees might have buckled, and the council members who'd gotten to their feet or were in the process of doing so indeed slumped to a one. The former were suddenly forced to put hands on the table for support, while the latter dropped heavily back into their chairs.

Is this the proud council of the elves? Ryn's rumbled growl seemed to vibrate in Ester's skull as he took a step forward to stand beside the High Chancellor's chair, now. Is this what the greatest of the er'endehn have to offer in a time of approaching war? Bickering and argument? Had I known to expect as much, I would not have bothered with the journey here.

If there were any in the room who wished to protest at this statement, they were smart enough to keep their resentment to themselves. This was the very council had once been cowed by the likes of Arrackes, after all.

Ester couldn't know what the elves must think of the presence of a true primordial in their chamber.

Those of you of the line of Erraven, you may consider me disappointed. Ryn continued without letting up on the pressure in his words, white-gold eyes falling on Beh'lys in particular. Seven hundred years—generations of separation, even among the elves—and you still have not been able to set aside your own wounds for the greater good. As for those of you of Ysenden's blood—his gaze moved to the end of the table, where the two older elves were just starting to smirk in victory—you hold the greatest power in your own city, and yet you still find it necessary to taunt those who have lost their homes and their history. They may be selfish, but I call you cowardly.

A few flinches of anger at this, but still no one spoke.

If you would all cease to bicker like children, perhaps the more clever among this council will take note of the fact that no decision has been made regarding the ruins of Erraven. We are in agreement, I imagine, that the draugr need to be disposed of, and with prejudice. We should not assume the thousand exiles you have cast from these walls are all Sebranya would have built up, in the time she has had. However, at the end of the day, our enemy is not a complicated one. Ghouls would be hardly more than fodder to the likes of your soldiers, and even wights cannot bear too complicated a Purpose. The drey and wereyn are more clever, and possessing their own will, but they are still instinctive beasts. Most importantly: for whatever reason, we've also yet seen no sign of the liche that once stood by the Queen's side.

"Meaning what?" the young general who had first crossed words with Ester's father asked, clearly trying to save some face as he met Ryn's eye stoically.

Meaning that if whatever horde lies in wait in Erraven has no commanding presence, it is entirely possible that this battle need not happen within the ruins at all, Arrackes answered in Ryn's stead, taking control of the conversation again now that the council had settled. The wights encountered by Colonel Syr'esh and our guests in the Vyr'esh were obviously driven to kill, not to hide or lie low. If we make enough noise, it is entirely possible we can draw the undead to us.

"That would be ideal," as'ahRen offered with a nod, jumping back in as well. "Attempting to take the fight into the old city would only put us at a disadvantage, given the rubble and ruins. In the forest itself, we would be able to hold an established line."

"A much stronger defense against the undead..." To the Lord Commander's side, an elf who's lined face made him look positively ancient wheezed in agreement, his clouded eye's half-lidded as he spoke. "It has been some centuries since I took to the field myself, but I recall this much, at the very least. If we give the wights in particular any means to get at our backs..."

Ester herself swallowed nervously as the shrunken general let the suggestion hang. In the forest she'd had the advantage of fighting atop Eyera, whose bulk and speed had help to keep the draugr at bay long enough for Ester to put an arrow in their skulls. Even in a line, however, the dark elf soldiers—inexperienced in fighting such an enemy—had been broken. She didn't even want to think what could happen among the old ruins, where there were undoubtedly a thousand places to skulk and strike from...

"So we lay siege?" Byr'esh asked, obviously being careful not to look at Ryn as he spoke again. *"We encircle the city? How much of our army would that take?"*

"I cannot recommend we deploy the entirety of the standing military," General Syr'esh cut in quickly. *"Not if it can be helped. My guards do not number enough to hold Ysenden if this is some sort of ploy..."*

"A valid concern." It was Sen'Hev's turn to speak, the scout commander avoiding Ryn's eye as well. *"It will not take us less than a day to gather the provisions and armaments necessary for any sort of sizable action, regardless. If you would grant me some additional time, I can have my eyes to and back from Erraven, which should allow us to gather much needed information."*

as'ahRen looked pensive at this, but eventually nodded. *"I think we can give you three days. That shouldn't break the odds in either direction..."* He eyed Sen'Hev carefully. *"I expect you to send your best, of course"*

"I will accompany them myself, Lord Commander," the general answered by way of promise.

"Then see to it. You have my leave."

There was a short silence as the scout commander stood at once, bowing to the head of the table before turning and striding briskly down the chamber. Reaching the double doors, she knocked once upon them, and they opened for her immediately, revealing several soldiers in the white-and-gold livery of the Chancellor's Guard. The moment the general was gone the entrance was closed again, shutting with a faint *boom* that echoed once across the stone of the windowless room.

As the conversation resumed, Ester thought she had at last caught a glimpse of the terrifying efficiency the *er'endehn* war machine was capable of.

"While we await Sen'Hev's return, we will need to take stock of our ranks," as'ahRen kept on without hesitation, gesturing down the table. *"I agree with Sureht. While we should not assume to face only a thousand nights, nor can we ignore the possibility that this is a plot to make Ysenden vulnerable."*

Ester wasn't sure who the Lord Commander was referring to until Syr'esh nodded his thanks at the support.

Ysenden cannot be left undefended, obviously, Ryn agreed from where he'd stepped back to resume translating for Declan again. *But aside from the numbers needed to satisfyingly defend the walls, I would recommend the deployment of as many as the er'endehn will allow. I would prefer we stand on the field and face a thousand twenty-to-one than regret hesitancy in the vice-versa.*

Agreed, Arrackes gave his assent grimly. *Should rousting the Queen's foothold prove simple, it means only that the soldiers can return quickly. There is little harm in being overly cautious in this scenario.*

"Then what can we spare?" the Lord Commander followed up with, looking down along the remaining council members. *"How many would we need to safely hold the walls in the event of a trap?"*

"With the alterations the High Chancellor has—in his wisdom—allowed in the last century, the number will not be insignificant." A narrow elf with a pinched face and a black goatee streaked with grey spoke up dryly, leaving no doubt what he thought of the "High Chancellor's wisdom". *"I feel the need to remind this council that I raised my concerns when the suggestion of glass windows and the like was brought up, and I would point out that—"*

"Yes, General ed'Vyn," as'ahRen cut the elf off with what looked like a deliberate effort not to roll his eyes. *"We have all heard your concerns before, several time. Fortunately, you are charged with city development, not security, and the additions you are referring to were not deemed a substantial enough risk to counter their benefits."* He looked around the table. *"Anyone else?"*

“Ten thousand would satisfy, sir,” General Syr’esh answered at once, though he looked hesitant. *“I would prefer more, but ten thousand—in addition to my five—will be able to hold at bay a siege of any reasonable size until the main army returned.”*

“Leaving us with thirty thousand?” the Lord Commander asked, and Ester recalled suddenly that Ryn had once told them the dark elves had flanked Sehranya with forty thousand blades in the Queen’s final battle.

It hurt her heart to hear that those numbers had not significantly increased even all these centuries later, and she couldn’t help but wonder just how many must have died in the rebellions that followed the war...

“Very nearly,” an elf of middling years—at least for his kind—spoke up from further down the table. He wore white robes, and had the sword of bow of Ysenden stitched in blue thread across his chest. *“I regret to remind this council that we have already lost more than a hundred souls to the Witch’s ilk, and I cannot recommend the rest of that command be deployed, including their officers.”* He offered General Syr’esh an apologetic look even as he continued. *“They require rest and psychological care, and many among them are being treated for physical wounds, some permanently crippling. Given the death toll, I am honestly surprised more didn’t come back in pieces.”*

“Oh, so not all magic is deplorable, is it?” Ester’s father muttered in quiet common from her side, forcing her to swallow a smile.

“Yes...” The Lord Commander looked suddenly grim as he answered the white-robed elf, eyes dipping to the table. *“Yes... Forgive me, General Vets. It has been so long since we’ve lost such a number at once that I hadn’t thought to discount them... Are they doing well?”*

The general—who Ester assumed could only be the medical commander—nodded. *“I only had the opportunity to inspect the more gravely wounded before the council was summoned, but I gather from my seconds that all will survive.”*

“And thank the spirits for that,” General Syr’esh said, closing his eyes and tilting his head back to the ceiling. *“My son is a capable officer, but to be ambushed by an enemy we all thought long-struck from this world...”* After a second, the guard commander opened his eyes again and looked down the table. *“With your permission, Vets, I would celebrate their return. It might do the bedridden good to see their comrades up and about.”*

“It very well might,” General Vets agreed. *“Give them a few days of rest, and then feel free.”*

“Good,” Syr’esh answered distractedly, looking—like the Lord Commander before him—to the table again. *“That’s damn good...”*

“So a little less than thirty-thousand,” as’ahRen himself summarized, glancing back to Ester and the others. *“I would deem that a satisfactory force to lay siege to Erraven with, wouldn’t you, Master Ryndean?”*

I will have to defer that opinion to you and the High Chancellor, Lord Commander, Ryn said with a short bow. *My companions and I are unfortunately not familiar with the old city, nor the surrounding lands.*

“That’s one way to put it...” Ester heard someone mutter from down the table, but she didn’t look around fast enough to catch the naysayer. What was more, neither Ryn, Declan, nor her father looked to have made out the quip, and—though she saw a brief tick of annoyance in the elf’s face—the Lord Commander seemed willing to ignore it in the interest of keeping the tenuous peace they had managed to cobble together.

“Then I do deem it enough,” he said before looking to Arrackes. *“Chancellor?”*

The older dragon looked to consider the choice, one clawed finger scratch absently at the table as he thought. After a few seconds he finally nodded, sitting up straight before speaking firmly to the room as a whole.

So be it. You know your duties, all of you. In three days time we march with thirty thousand, including those of us here who are not essential to Ysenden’s daily functions. Dismissed.

The discharging of the generals to their responsibilities was so abrupt, Ester wasn’t the only one taken aback. Several of the generals blinked, and from her right her father tried to speak.

“Wait, we’ve yet to discuss—!”

His exclamation, unfortunately, was drowned out by the scrapping of some twenty chairs and the thudding of boots as the council departed the chamber, many in conversation while they moved. Ester saw the medical commander Vets speaking with the two generals of Ysenden's line that had drawn Ryn's earlier ire, and Syr'esh had caught up to the spymaster Yl'ah Ryvus, undoubtedly coordinating their partnership. Ester's father tried again to speak, but it was no use, and only after the council had completely departed and the doors had been shut once more behind them was his voice able to be heard once again.

"High Chancellor Arrackes..." the mage began, clearly working to keep the anger from his voice as he turned to the older dragon, who had kept his seat. "Might I enquire as to why you failed to bring up the *most* important part of the conversation we presented you with?"

Arrackes, for his part, said nothing for a long moment. Eventually, however, the silence lingered too long as Ester, Declan, and Ryn continued to stare at his back as well, all while as'ahRen sat quietly by, watching the exchange warily.

Magus, I regret to admit that you and I have different opinions as to the benefits of your 'Accord of Four'. Very different opinions.

"Oh?" the mage responded. "Is that a fact? You failed to say as much when we spoke of it earlier, I believe."

I failed to say anything on the subject, in fact, and quite deliberately. Arrackes at last took to his feet, standing up and stepping away from his seat to face Ester and the others. *Truthfully, I find it a little alarming that you would assume me receptive to the concept, given what happen last time my people were subject to the weaves of the Accord.*

Arrackes... Ryn said in warning, but the lesser dragon only shook his head at his primordial.

With all do respect, Ryndean, this is not something you can command I change my opinion on. I never thought it wise that Tyrennus allowed us to be included in those magics, before or after the war with Aletha.

"Aletha's nobles," Declan corrected coolly. "I am living proof that the Accord was crafted with a mind to *preserve* the relations of the races, not eradicate them. Igoric al'Dyor was murdered for attempting to weave a lasting peace, High Chancellor."

Your kind lost a king, Declan Idrys, the dragon answered evenly. Mine lost more than ninety percent of our entire population. What say you to that?

"We say that the Accord is not a perfect magic," Ester's father saved Declan from having to respond. "But it *is* the greatest chance we have to rid the world of Sehranya and her like once and for all. A binding of our four races would give us no choice but to collaborate against her."

Is that so? Arrackes asked, looking to the mage. *Then why have the wood elves of the Vyr'en not already joined mankind on the battlefield against the wereyn? Or the dragons?*

"The Accord is not enforced regarding conflict that can be won without assistance," Ester's father answered. "Otherwise it would require the ruling parties of each race to deploy for every minor tussle or skirmish. If Ryndean has not felt the pull to intervene, then the weaves have calculated that the wereyn are not a great enough threat to extinguish mankind on their own."

So that's why... Ester had had the same question herself for some time, though—knowing her father—she'd figured there had to be a good reason. By the brief look of understanding on Declan's face, he too must have been pleased to have an answer to that particular mystery.

It is possible that this is why Sehranya has deployed nothing more than the wereyn into Viridian, Ryn picked up for the mage. It is also possible that it's the reason the dark elves are now being targeted by the draugr. If she knows that you are the last holdout of the pact, she would be aware too that that your people are the most vulnerable.

'Holdout' is hardly a fair term, Ryndean, Arrackes said, a spasm of irritation in his jaw. As I recall, the er'endehn were already in the middle of a war against Sehranya when Igoric al'Dyor called the other races to council. Even then it to a year for the negotiations to conclude and the Accord to be enacted, time in which man, the er'enthyl, and—yes—even the dragons could have aided the dark elves even without the assistance of magic.

“We hardly knew what we were facing!” Ester father growled in answer to this. “Igoric was the one who foresaw the danger, who tried to—!”

“There is another concern, if I might interject.”

Lord Commander as’ahRen stood up from his chair at last, having only listened to the argument silently until that point.

“You know now of our history, of the events that followed the old war.” The aging elf spoke calmly, but his gaze was unyielding. “Humanity has rebounded, as it is want to do, and the *er’enthyl* lost only a handful of soldiers and their crown prince to Sehranya’s efforts. Of the four races, the *er’endben* and the dragons alone are still suffering from our losses. Should we bind ourselves to this ‘Accord of Four’—should we allow ourselves woven into its magics—we would be at a great disadvantage.”

Ester frowned at this. “Would it not be the opposite, Lord Commander? Should you accept the Accord, and be targeted by Sehranya’s full strength, then the other races—”

“Would do what, yr’Essel?” the elf gently cut her off with a sad look. “Come to our aid? Assist us? Perhaps the attempt would be made, but it is not so simple. Karn’s Line—your ‘Mother’s Tears’—is a brutal ascent, and we know it now also to be the realm of the Witch. Even if the al’Dyors you say still hold power ordered their armies into the mountains, how would that be received? To the common officers and soldiers, how would that be any different than ordering the mass suicide of the ranks, particularly if the greater part of mankind has forgotten the *er’endebn* even exist? And the wood elves? And the dragons? The *er’enthyl* would have to cross through Viridian, which it sounds like would be a declaration of war with the populace of your realm even if the al’Dyors and the family ehn’Vyr’en know better. And the dragons? How would they even know to come?” The Lord Commander gestured at Ryn. “Their primordial is standing right here.”

And even if he should return to the Reaches in time to assemble help, there is no guarantee they would agree to assemble, Arrackes added darkly, looking suddenly very tired.

Ester felt a stone sink into her gut at these words, and she turned to see Ryn—the ever-towering, strong Ryn—wince ever so slightly. It was true, after all. From what the dragon and her father had told them—long before they’d even made for Ysenden—what had been left of the dragon race had largely blamed their young primordial for bringing the destruction down on their heads when he’d saved Amherst and Elysia al’Dyor from blades of the Kant, al’Behn, and Vostyk houses. It was madness, of course—the nobles had been looking for a reason to expand mankind’s influence regardless—but the fact remained.

Ryn was—despite being the last primordial of the dragons—an outcast among his own kind, those few who had stayed loyal to him largely scattered across the realms.

“As I said, the Accord is not a perfect magic,” Ester’s father spoke up, his voice growing stronger where Ryn had been dealt a lowering blow. “But even with its imperfections, it remains our greatest shield against Sehranya’s plans. Should she manage to form a wedge between any of our four races—should she break Aletha, or Ysenden, or eradicate the remaining dragons—then those lost lives would be as nothing compared to risk of our collective kinds being wiped from the map.”

I do not claim that the magics are entirely without merit, Magus, I merely am not of the same opinion as you that the advantages they provide outweigh the risk to my people—to both my peoples. Arrackes’ fatigue was increasingly apparently, and Ester couldn’t blame the dragon. His age aside, the High Chancellor had very suddenly been saddled with the news of Sehranya’s return, the death of more than a hundred of his soldiers, and the responsibility of dealing with the Queen’s already-established foothold in his lands.

And that wasn’t even counting the subservience he was clearly working to show Ryn, which—even as she thought of it—Ester’s father decided to turn to.

“Ryndean,” the mage hissed, looking to the black dragon. “You cannot allow this. If we fail to establish the Accord...”

He let his concerns hang, trusting that Ester, Declan, and Ryn were aware of the possible repercussions. The dragon, however, said nothing for several seconds as he watched Arrackes with a frown on his face.

Unfortunately, I'm afraid there's not much for me to do here...

“But—!” Ester’s father began, but it was Declan who cut him short with a shake of his head.

“Bonner, if I’m not mistaken, Ryn doesn’t mean to imply he *won’t* do anything. He means he *can’t*.” The younger man gestured to the council table standing empty behind the High Chancellor. “Even if he were to command Arrackes to tell the elves to join the Accord, it would mean nothing. The society is a republic, not an autocracy.”

“The boy has the right of it, yr’Essel.” as’ahRen spoke up again, moving to stand with crossed arms on the other side of the Chancellor’s empty chair. “What’s more—and I admit I’m hardly the most knowledgeable when it comes to your ‘weaves’—at the end of the day the High Chancellor is not of the *er’endebn*. Would his assent to submit to the Accord even hold? Would you not need to the agreement and binding of the council, rather?”

Bonner bit his cheek at this, consider.

“I’m not sure...” he admitted after a moment. “I would have to study the magics a bit more. I have to admit that when we crafted the spell, it never occurred to any of us that the High Chancellor of the *er’endben* would ever in fact *not be an er’endebn...*”

Then it seems that settles the matter for the moment, at the very least. Arrackes promptly seized the opportunity to end the conversation, standing a little straighter. *I will not prohibit you from bringing up the Accord with the council, Magus. Should they deem it the correct course of action, I will bend to their will. I merely ask that you refrain from doing so until after we have dealt with the current situation in Erraven.*

Declan frowned at that. “All due respect, High Chancellor, but without your support—or at least that of the Lord Commander’s—” he nodded pointedly to as’ahRen “—the council is unlikely to so much as consider binding themselves to the weave. It took us weeks for *some* of Colonel Syr’esh’s command to not see our magics as anything more than foul, and that was with the support of the ay’ahSels and the colonel himself.”

Then I suppose you have your work cut out for you, Declan Idrys, Arrackes said with a nod. *If the Accord of Four is indeed as pertinent to the survival of our world as you all deem it to be, I genuinely hope you find the means by which to convince the council.*

“And what if we managed to convince you...?” Declan asked tentatively.

Arrackes gave him a weary smile.

Then everything I know and love will have already burned to the ground, and there will be nothing left for me to lose regardless.