

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“If that damn elf kills me, you get my ring...”

- - Declan Idrys,
- to Ryndean, Primordial of the Dragons,
- post-training

“Left hand, Declan! Watch left hand!”

It was fortunate that, in the two weeks since they’d departed the frozen lake, Declan had gotten accustomed to Lysiat’s simplified instruction. There had been a time when he would have questioned if the elf meant *his* hand or *his opponent’s*, but with the passing days he’d improved not only in his understanding of the *er’endebrn* tongue, but in his following of his trainer’s rapid feedback. For this reason his blue eyes snapped immediate to the right, noticing the twist of his sparring partner’s wrist just in time to see the blow coming.

Unfortunately, that didn’t mean he’d gotten fast enough yet to *do* anything with such feedback.

Crack!

“Ah!” Declan shouted, unable to help himself as the heavy, smooth wood that made up the practice sword’s blade caught him full in the shoulder, unyielding in its weight. His entire right arm spasmed in shock, and he very nearly lost his grip on his own weapon as he staggered sideways.

“Point!”

Gritting his teeth against the ache of the offended limb, Declan caught himself and looked around to find Tesied grinning at him, weapon still held where he’d landed the strike.

“Point,” Declan acknowledged resignedly, straightening up with a grunt. The dark elf nodded, still smiling, before turning to jerk his head in summoning.

From the edge of the ring of dirt Lysiat had had them clear for their usual morning practice, Aliek pushed himself off the tree he’d been leaning against to trade places with his brother, rolling his wooden blade in broad circles to warm up his wrist.

“*Still think two enemies be unfair!*” Declan shouted past the twins in broken elvish as they crossed each other.

From the warmest spot she’d found among the rare shafts of light that marked a sunny day above the canopy overhead, Lysiat raised an eyebrow and muttered something while Ryn—stand at her left—looked to be trying to hide a laugh. Ester, on the other hand, seated on the cleaned-off body of a fallen trunk to the commander’s right, shouted a translation back at him.

“It’s fair when you need twice the practice!”

Declan shot the two women a sour look before walking a short circle about the ring, rubbing and shaking his shoulder out in an attempt to ward off the ache while Aliek waited patiently for him to be set.

“Maybe I’d complain less if I was actually allowed to use *everything I had*,” he muttered to himself, finally coming to a stop and raising his wooden sword to indicate that he was ready.

As he’d hoped—and anticipated, truth be told—Declan was learning at an extraordinary rate, faster even than when Ryn had finally been able to work with him and Ester after they’d found a blade that suited the dragon. Ryn had since been outfitted with a similar weapon—a spare from Kellek Syr’esh’s own arsenal to

replace the one they'd lost to the tunneler—but he'd been content to remain an observer for these daily morning sessions.

Probably purely for the entertainment, Declan thought begrudgingly as Aliek flashed towards him in a blur of black and gold.

While he *was* indeed learning at an astronomical pace—he could actually survive an engagement with the brothers for more than handful of seconds now—the problem was that Bonner had completely forbade him from using suffusion when it came to his training. His reasoning had been logical, of course—reinforcement required a strong body as a base, and one could not improve one's physical abilities if they relied on magic too heavily—but in retrospect Declan wished he'd had an argument to protest the order.

The simple fact of the matter was that *without* his weaves of strength and speed—which he'd grown steadily more in control of with Bonner's help—he was still a long way from being a match for Tesied or Aliek, much less Lysiat when she chose to grace the ring herself.

Aliek's wooden blade cut at his head in a blur from below, forcing Declan to duck and lean sideways. He countered with his own strike at the elf's armored thighs, but the man just danced away before closing the distance again in a blink, thrusting at Declan's chest. Declan deflected and snapped the pommel of his sword at his opponent's face, but Aliek was already dropping himself to the ground as he spun to slash at Declan's right side. Twisting just in time to catch the blow on his own blade, Declan saw the elf reverse his turn to bring one leg around heavily at the back of Declan's ankles. This exact sweep had brought him down a dozen times over the last two weeks, and he was ready for it. Leaping up, Declan almost grinned as Aliek's leg passed by harmlessly beneath him.

He was less amused when the elf continued the twist, bringing the wooden sword around in a dervish to cut at his *left* side this time.

All while he was still in the air.

“Ooph,” Declan grunted, getting his blade around just in time to block the blow awkwardly even as his new boots touched dirt again. He might have saved himself the point, but it meant he landed improperly and off balance, which Aliek *immediately* took advantage of. As Declan stumbled backwards the elf lunged, slashing again and again at his hasty defenses, his blocks and parries more desperate than calculated as momentum kept pulling his feet behind him.

In the end, the fight came to a close the moment his heel found the jutting root of one of the many trees that towered all about their little circle, and Declan was on his back in the dirty snow for what had to have been the thousandth time in a fraction as many days.

The sensation of something hard poking him in the chest even as he lay there didn't help his frustration.

“Point,” Aliek said as he pressed the tip of his practice sword to the black cuirass of Declan's elven leathers, gloating less than his brother, but sounding the faintest bit amused all the same.

“Point,” Declan granted him with a sigh.

The elf gave him a nod of approval and small smile, then let the blade fall in favor of offering Declan his free hand to help him up. Declan accepted it gratefully, and would have voiced his thanks as he was hauled to his feet had his attention not been immediately drawn away by a sudden pain in the side of his right shin.

Thwak!

“Ow!” Declan exclaimed, half-limping and half-hopping away just in time to avoid a second whack in the leg by Lysiat, who had appeared beside the pair of them like a demon summoned. *“What was that for?”*

Though it was doubtful she'd understood the question—few of the elves had taken to Bonner's offer to teach them the common tongue of Viridian—the commander seemed to have been of a mind to give him just that answer already.

“*You jump!*” she growled in simplified answer, eyes narrow beneath the severe line of the white hair she’d pulled back in a swirling arc of tight braids. “*Why you jump?!*”

“To avoid the sweep!” Declan answered back, dodging another swipe at him by the wooden sword she carried. “To get clear of his legs and stabilize for a counter attack!”

Lysiat’s gaze only sharpened further, but Ester and Ryn had by that point crossed the practice ring to help.

Declan, you’re supposed to be practicing your elvish, the dragon reminded him, holding a clawed hand out to keep the commander from advancing further. Over one shoulder, the gold pommel of his new blade—only a foot or so shorter than his old steel one—flashed briefly in a ray of sunlight. *We’re not far from Ysenden. The greater your mastery of the tongue, the less trouble you’re likely to have in the city.*

Declan wanted to groan at that, but even Ester was watching him expectantly now as Tesied, too, joined them, so he gave it his best shot.

“*I leap to miss leg,*” he said, turning to Lysiat and doing his best to mime the circular kick with his free hand. “*To miss Aliek’s leg.*”

“*Sweep.*” Ester offered him the elvish word.

“*I leap to miss Aliek’s sweep,*” Declan corrected with a nod of thanks to her before looking to Lysiat again.

The commander looked a little mollified at his use of elvish, but she was still shaking her head. “*With me,*” she ordered him, indicating the clearing even as she started for it herself. Declan followed dutifully, and a few seconds later they were facing one another in the very center of the space.

“*No jump,*” the commander said with a sharp shake of her head, signing the same with her free hand and using her single practice sword to point at his legs. “*Never jump. Know why?*”

“Obviously not,” Declan muttered in frustration, but a glance at Ryn and Ester’s stern looks at the edge of the circle had him sighing and answering more deliberately. “*No. Do not know.*”

Lysiat seemed to have expected this, because she jerked her sword upward in obvious gesture. “*I show you. Jump.*”

Declan would have groaned at the bad feeling budding in his gut at the order, but he knew better than to argue. Making sure he had a firm hold of his blade, he squatted dutiful before shoving himself up and into the air.

The elf was on him like an arrow shot from a bow, her blade cutting at him straight on. Declan grimaced, blocking as his feet touched down again, but at once he found himself in the same position he’d been with Aliek, backpedaling against Lysiat’s onslaught. Fortunately for him, the commander was clearly not intent on shoving him out of the ring, because after three or four steps she stopped.

“*Again,*” she ordered curtly, motioning to the center again.

This time when he jumped, she slashed at his side, as her brother had. The blow came even faster this time, catching his guard in midair, and as a result Declan landed even more awkwardly than the two previous times, nearly twisting his ankle before falling to one knee with hardly a prayer of defending himself from Lysiat’s follow-up. The commander pulled the blow, halting her wooden blade an inch from his left temple, then drew the weapon back as she stepped away and motioned for him to stand.

“*Legs are foundation,*” she told him, signing along with the words and watching while Declan planted his sword into the frozen ground to leverage himself up. “*You know this. Sacrifice foundation, sacrifice life. Why sacrifice life?*”

Declan thought this was a *little* dramatic, but answered all the same, gesturing himself in the language or soldiers for practice even as he spoke roughly. “*No warriors like the er’endehn, in Viridian. No speed like the er’endehn. A human doing that... Doubtful.*”

Lysiat's gaze narrowed again, and she snapped an order.

"I jump. You will strike."

"Wha—?" Declan started to ask in common, but she was already lunging at him.

She didn't fight at her usual speed, which was the only reason he managed to hold her off as well as she did. Her slashes and strikes were still quick, true, but in two weeks Declan had adapted well enough to keep up to *this* pace at least, if not easily. It offered him the opportunity to keep an eye on her body, watching her hips and knees in particular.

When the subtle crouch came, therefore, he was ready.

Lysiat leapt at him in a flying thrust, going for his upper chest. Declan sidestepped and swung in the same motion, aiming a heavy blow at her open side. The commander twisted and just managed to block, as he had, but as skilled as she was she remained slight of body and—therefor—weight. The impact hit a fraction of a breath before she landed, and as a result she was knocked completely sideways, visibly staggering for the first time Declan had ever seen. Nimble as always, of course, the woman managed to turn the momentum into a one-handed summersault and was back on her feet in a blink.

Still, her point had been made the moment the wooden sword had struck true.

"You are human, Declan," she said steadily, signing that they were done as he remained tense. *"You have speed. Not many humans, perhaps, but if you have speed, others have speed, too."*

A memory of a stocky woman with a scarred face and short grey hair flashed across Declan's mind, and he almost let out a nervous laugh. He wondered if Cassandra Sert had ever cleaved someone open midair, and decided it was entirely possible.

"Jump is opening," Lysiat was still saying. *"Like any opening, when looking for it, will see it."* She pointed with her sword at Declan's lower body again as she repeated herself. *"Legs are foundation."*

"Legs are foundation," Declan echoed, understanding. *"Jump is opening."*

Lysiat offered him a small smile, not unlike Aliek's. *"You see. Good. Ready for again?"*

Declan sighed, reaching up to rub his sore shoulder once more, but nodded all the same. Lysiat started out of the circle at once, motioning for Tesied to replace her.

The moment her brother was in place and she'd found her patch of sunlight again, the commander slashed her sword through the air while Ryn and Ester looked on.

"Again!"

"Ow-ow-ooowwww!" Declan grumbled an hour later, wincing as Bonner prodded at his bare back from behind. "If I wanted to get stabbed more I would have just asked to stay in the ring!"

"Instead of complaining, how about just working on holding still?" the mage grumbled in response, brow furrowed in concentration as he worked.

Declan, in answer, offered him a deadpan gaze over one shoulder. "And *how*, exactly, would you recommend I do that, in this moment?"

They were, like every morning after training, on the move again, which meant he and Bonner were on foot as Ester rode Eyera at their backs. Orsik was off in the woods since his usual passenger was busy being healed after the day's usual beating, and Ryn's tall form could be seen now and then ahead of them, having joined the higher officers at the front of the march to ask after their estimated arrival in the city. All around them the

er'endebrn soldiers moved in calculated disarray, optimizing their speed by forgoing an ordered file in favor of a wider spread of bodies across a dozen yards in either direction. Their dark figures slipped across the floor of the Vyr'esh like wraiths, traveling in near-silence despite their number. Only Declan and his party made any real noise, but it had been some days now since the lot of them had stopped receiving the irritated glances from the soldiers at every sound, their presence finally seeming to have been accepted within the ranks.

All of them suspected that Ryn had much to do with that—including the dragon himself—but not one among their four could ever seem to come up with a single valid reason as to *why* whenever they put their heads together about it.

It was also possible, of course, that their place among the soldiers had merely become accepted as the two weeks had passed. Bonner's magic—originally vilified in most every eye within the old encampment by the lake—had been steadily growing in esteem among the *er'endben*, in particular after he'd managed to save the mangled limb of a sentry who'd been nearly dragged away by wolves in the night. Ester—who had always enjoyed at least *some* measure of acceptance by elves given her *er'enthyll* blood—had earned herself a reputation as an excellent student and steadily-improving marksman, and had even recently taken to joining the nightly hunting parties that pressed into the trees each evening as they made camp.

As for Declan...

Declan was still the odd man out, he knew, but he was equally aware that this was steadily changing. While a majority of the soldiers still watched him carefully whenever they had the chance, he had grown closer with the ay'ahSel siblings since starting his training, even slowly earning the right to address all three of them by their first names. Tesied had come around almost from the start, boisterous as he was for an elf, with Aliek following his twin with a little more reservation. Amusingly enough, Lysiat had opened up practically immediately after that, like the commander had only been looking for an excuse to be less formal with Declan and his companions. He didn't blame her delay. She was a middle officer of the *er'endebrn* military, with a greater need for decorum than her sergeant-ranked brothers. After so long in solitude together, it had been a little saddening to see her initially shell up again once they'd reached the safety of the elven camp, but the promptness of her return to the more-casual air the two of them had started to share in the tunnels and outskirts of the forest told Declan she'd only been doing what was expected of her. The elf had made up for it, too, both in and out of the training circle. Beyond those morning sessions, the siblings also joined them for meals, and even in the march if any of them were ever at liberty to do so.

In the time since they'd left the southern rim of the Vyr'esh behind, Declan was almost ready to call Lysiat—as well as her brothers—friends, a fact that he suspected had lent itself to the reduction in narrowed stares thrown their way over the last half-month.

Though still not as much as this odd reverence the elves seemed to have for Ryn, he couldn't help but think to himself, catching another glimpse of the dragon through the trees ahead of them.

Then he winced as, with a pulse of tingling energy, whatever Bonner was doing to him made something *thunk* into place.

"Ow..." he hissed for the hundredth time, glancing back again. "What was that?"

"Dislocated rib," the old man answered simply, pulling his hands away from Declan and wiping them off on the front of his robes. "Not the last one you'll suffer before you catch up to those demons, I expect. All done now, though."

"Thanks," Declan grumbled, rolling his newly-healed shoulder experimentally as he pulled the black shirt that was part of the wardrobe Colonel Syr'esh had seen him fit with from the camp commander's spares. "And you're probably right. I'm surprised I haven't broken a bone yet."

"Yet' being the operative word," Ester said, heeling Eyera up to them now that she saw her father was done with his work. "I'm glad Ryn still thinks I should be spending more time training with him before asking Lysiat to take me on, too. I think those damn brothers in particular like using you as a practice dummy." She

watched Declan finish tightening the threads along the split neck of his shirt before continuing. “Want your leathers?”

“Please,” he answered with a nod, holding up a hand expectantly as Ester reached into one of Eyera’s traveling sacks. “And glad I’m not the only one. It would be a different story if I was allowed to suffuse myself.” He glared around at Bonner even as Ester pulled out and handed him his folded cuirass. The elven armor was truly incredible—as compactible as it was sturdy—and he took a moment to admire the workmanship for the hundredth time in the last two weeks. He had learned—as he’d studied the elven language further with the ay’ahSels—that the patterning and adornments of the gold gilding were not random or without reason. They denoted, as it turned out, the *rank* of a soldier, as chest and shoulder markers did in the Vigil. Declan’s, ironically, apparently labeled him as a “colonel” given that they had been Syr’esh’s, but he doubted any among the sharp-eyed *er’endehn* would *actually* confuse him for an officer of the army.

Pulling the chest piece over his head, he listened as Bonner addressed his comment with a huff.

“I’ve told you a dozen times already. If you let yourself depend too much on your weaves then—”

“Then my body itself won’t improve, and the base on which I build those weaves will be lacking, yes, yes.” Declan’s voice was loud in his own ears from inside the leathers as he struggled to pull them on. Despite Syr’esh apparently being about as broad as any elf came, the Colonel’s dimensions had still proven wanting to Declan’s own, making the armor tough to don and doff. He had a hope that he’d be able to find a craftsman in Ysenden who could outfit him with a more appropriately-sized set once they reached the city, but Declan couldn’t help but expect their reception—particularly his and Bonner’s—wasn’t going to be so warm as to endear them to the local population within any reasonable frame of time.

“I’ll tell you what,” Bonner said with a sigh. “I will allow you to maintain a minimum weave of suffusion during training, but—”

“Wait, really?” Declan grinned at the man excitedly through a ruffled sheet of hair as he finally managed to tug the cuirass down over his chest, freeing his head. “That’s fantas—!”

“*But—*” Bonner repeated pointedly “—only if you start your mind-speech training again.”

Declan groaned, almost missing Ester handing him his shoulder pauldrons. “Bonner, we’ve been through this. Every time I tried in the tunnels, you and Ryn looked like you’d been hit in the head with a hammer. I can’t control my magic enough to keep from—”

“If Ryndean and I can’t handle a little ringing of the ears, we’ve not much business being a former court magus and a bloody *dragon* now, do we?” Bonner told him, dismissing his trepidation with a frown. “Truthfully, Declan—while your concern is appreciated—it is irresponsible. Imagine if you could have communicated to us after you’d fled that worm with ay’ahSel? How much easier would it have been for everyone to know you were alive?”

“Honestly Bonner, given that an undead beast the width of a large house was attempting to take a rather large chunk out of me, I’m not sure I would have had the thought to do so even if I’d been able to.” With a dull *clunk* the shoulder armor set itself in place via the clever overlapping ridges in the metal details that lined the leather. With the second under his other arm, Declan worked to knot off the cords that would lock everything together as Ester stifled a laugh over head.

Ignoring his daughter, Bonner frowned. “But that’s entirely my *point*, Declan. With enough training, calling out to us wouldn’t have required ‘the thought to do so’! Do you separately consider every action when you walk, when you swing a sword?”

“Of late, yes,” Declan answered, pushing the other pauldron into place. “When it comes to the sword at least. The ay’ahSels make me feel like the ten-year-old boy I was when I first picked up a blade, and not in a good way.”

Bonner rolled his eyes. “Regardless, what I mean is that with practice, it can become a natural thing, innate. And if you’re going to argue with me that mind-speech would not have come in handy a thousand times already

on this blasted journey of ours, then I will fuse that armor into one solid piece so that you can never get out of it again!”

Declan chuckled but didn't respond. The mage had a point, of course. Being able to communicate privately or across extended distances would *certainly* have been useful in more than one way, even before he'd know anything of magic or dragons or draugr. If he was honest with himself, Declan's hesitation came simply from the fact that he was *exhausted*, and almost always so. His training under Lysiat aside, no time had been wasted by Bonner in starting up Declan's magical instruction once again, focusing simultaneously now on pyro- *and* corpomancy. The resulting improvement in both arts had been as steady as ever, and equally as exciting, but it also left Declan more and more drained, which he had a greater appreciation for after his inadvertent bout of arcane fatigue. It was more a mental and physical exhaustion this time around, but the results were much the same, particularly given that he still channeled his weaves of warmth and strength at nearly all times other than training.

Speaking of which, Declan thought to himself, reaching inward. The spell of warmth he'd previously summoned—emanating from the firestone now looped about his neck from a heat-resistant thong of leather Bonner had enchanted for him—had waned with the distraction of Bonner's healing, as had his unbound suffusion. Now that his rib was back in place, though—he would *definitely* get his revenge on Aliek one day for deliberately driving him backwards into a tree—he called on the weaves once more, the now-familiar tingle of magical energy joining the heat to wash out of his chest into his arms and legs, then his fingers and toes. Over the last two weeks the spell of strength had become a much stronger sensation upon initiation—almost uncomfortably so—and Declan had to hold his breath a moment before the prickling subsided to a dull, quiet hum of power that he knew would fade within the hour to almost nothing.

It paid, after all, to have the greatest living mage mentoring you on how to manipulate and compress your spells so that they were stronger, steadier, and less obtrusive all at once.

Declan! Grab Ester and Bonner and get them up here! Quickly!

Declan blinked, surprised by the abrupt ring of Ryn's voice through his ears. He didn't miss the urgency in the dragon's words on the other hand, and so spoke up at once to cut off Bonner, who he hadn't realized had continued his tirade on the importance of learning to mind-speak.

“—because there was the time you almost got your head ripped off by a wight. And just the evening before that, you could have called for help directly when that warg pinned you down. Luck got you through both of those disasters. Luck and—”

“Ryn wants us to join him at the head,” Declan told them quickly, looking from Bonner to Ester, who was already holding out his bracers for him to take next. “Now. It seems important.”

The mage stuttered to a stop, but the yr'Essels exchanged only a quick glance of alarm before he found his tongue again.

“Esteria, lead the way.”

Ester nodded, waiting only for Declan to accept the metal-lined bracers before clucking Eyera into a trot, her father right on the warg's heels. Declan trailed them as quickly as he could while donning the armor, ignoring the mixed glances of curiosity and subtle irritation cast their way by the marching elves they overtook.

He had one bracer on completely by the time they reached the head of the march, and was busy lacing up the other when he stopped short, taken aback by the sight that greeted him.

Ryn was standing still, one hand outstretched to hold back Colonel Syr'esh, whose steady features were in sharp contrast to the irritated expression of the higher officers who flanked him as they snarled questions at the dragon that even Declan could tell all amounted to “What the *hell* are you doing?” He would have bet Ryn's unexplained privilege in the eyes of the elves was the only thing that had kept blades in their sheaths until that moment, but then a glint of light caught his eye and he noticed—with no small measure of alarm—that Lysiat, Aliek, and Tesied were all standing nearby, swords and spears drawn respectively. For a second Declan feared

that the ay'ahSels had readied their blades in answer to Ryn's hand on the Colonel's chest, but then two things caught his eye that spoke otherwise, though neither bode well. First, the dragon too had drawn the great four-foot sword Syr'esh had lent him, its black blade and gilded hilt steady in his left hand despite the weight.

Second, neither Ryn nor the ay'ahSels were looking at each other, but appeared instead to be scanning the trees before them even as the march came to a slow halt at their backs.

"Ryn, what's happening?"

Bonner was the first to speak up, pushing through the last line of officers without a care for the upturned lips more than one of them showed at his passing. Declan followed the mage, shouldering through when needed as he left Ester atop Eyera, the half-elf already instinctively scanning the forest herself for trouble.

Bonner. Declan. Ryn sounded almost relieved to have them in sight. Something's off. Something's wrong.

Declan tensed up at once, one hand going immediately to the blade at his hip as he felt Bonner pause beside him in much the same fashion, but the dragon had already turned from them again to address Syr'esh and his company.

Colonel, he rumbled. How many soldiers did we leave the lake with?

Syr'esh frowned at him, but before he could answer Major y'Rehl—standing not far to his left—spoke up in anger. Declan didn't catch everything she said, but he was pleased to find he at least got the gist of the statement without needing Ester beside him to translate.

I will place my hand wherever I see fit if I believe it may save a life, Major, Ryn growled back, not even looking at the woman and repeating himself more urgently. Colonel, I ask again. How many soldiers did we leave the lake with?

This time, when more of the officers started to voice their protest, Syr'esh held them up with a raised hand. He was watching the dragon with a frown, his otherwise-even gaze making it impossible to tell if he was concerned or angered by Ryn's sudden trespass on his person.

In the end, he appeared to decide answering was in everyone's best interest.

"200 of our kind exactly," Declan thought he'd caught. "Six ranking officers to offset the six dead in the mountains."

Ryn gave a low snarl at that, the answer obviously not to his liking as his attention immediately returned to the woods. To his left the ay'ahSels' tension redoubled, and Declan had to appreciate that the siblings, at the very least, had spent enough time with them now to be clearly willing to trust the dragon at his word.

Then again, the last time Ryn had warned them all that something was wrong, the tunneler had crushed most of what had been left of their scouting unit...

"Ryn, what's going on?" Bonner repeated in a hiss, moving to step up between the dragon and the colonel, pushing Ryn's arm down and away from Syr'esh.

I came up to ask how much farther we had to go, Ryn explained, gold-white eyes not leaving the trees. The Colonel said we'd have a day and a half more to walk once we reached some river called 'the Lyons', so I searched the woods to see if we might be approaching it. He nodded in a northeasterly direction. The river is there, barely half a mile off.

"And?" Bonner asked, clearly doubting that that was the end of the story.

And not including our party, there are only 196 souls in these woods with us, Bonner.

The chill that swept across their gathered number then was so absolute it was palpable in the stiffening shoulders of several of the officers and soldiers standing around and before Declan. It convinced him, at long last, that there was more to the elves' respect for Ryn than the mere fact that he was—in most respects—a higher being than they. Esteem did not explain how every single *er'endehn* around them seemed to understand immediately what Ryn's words meant. They knew—intimately so, it seemed—of Ryn's senses, knew of his ability to extend his conscious into the word about him. Declan would have found it suspicious, he was sure, except that the immediate implication of Ryn's statements was far more disturbing.

“Four gone?” he asked, taking his own turn to push his way forward to stand on the dragon’s other side, between him and Aliek. “You’re sure?”

He asked more out of habit, knowing full well what the answer would be.

I’m sure, Ryn said with a slow nod, and his eyes—a moment ago so intent on the woods before them—seemed to focus on something else as he expanded his consciousness to recheck. *There are 196 dark elves with us in these—*

But then he froze, distant eyes going wide, entire body unmoving.

“Ryn?” Declan asked quietly, reaching up to put a hand on the dragon’s shoulder. Even then, it was a few more seconds before he got an answer.

195, Ryn hissed. *Now it’s a 195...*

The winter cold was nothing as compared to the chill that descended on them, in that moment. For two frozen seconds not a one among their number so much as breathed, taking in this implication. Four had been lost since the morning—roll call would have notified unit leaders earlier, otherwise—and a fifth had vanished even as they’d been standing there.

And what was more...

“You can’t see what’s taking them, can you?” Declan breathed, an cool calm starting to climb its way up his spine.

At his side, Ryn hesitated, lips tightening to bare his white teeth slightly as he obviously pressed his senses, willing them to go further, deeper.

Then, though, he shook his head slowly.

“Sehranya...!” Bonner hissed, and that single word was enough to finally get the dark elves acting in a flurry of commands.

“*Arms!*” Declan understood Syr’esh’s bellowed order, but the other shouts and instructions that cascaded from this were lost to him in the furor. Before he knew it soldiers had spilled out in front of him with weapons drawn, and in seconds he, Ryn, and Bonner were facing the inside of a living wall of *er’endehn*, Lysiat, Aliek, and Tesied among those standing directly before them. Declan looked around, witnessing in amazement as all about them the scattered soldiers collapsed in- and outward to form a single wide ring, almost perfectly circular despite the trees and the unevenness of the terrain. Some strides behind him, Ester cursed as she, too, watched the precision of the elves in amazement, until suddenly they and the higher officers were the only ones left standing within the defensive formation.

The moment the last of the elves had settled into a ready stance, however, the world went silent again.

Declan listened, then, straining to make out any sounds that might reveal what it was they were facing. He had an inkling himself, but didn’t want to voice the possibility aloud for fear that doing so might make it real. All around him, the others were just as still, just as silent. Even Eyera was unmoving, ears twitching this way and that as Ester leaned down to rest a hand atop her head.

Eyera...?

Declan had to stop himself from cursing as he realized their mistake. He looked up at Ester, who had stiffened as she touched the hair between the female’s ears, like the feel of it had triggered the same realization. Her green eyes were wide, her mouth shaped into an “oh” of concern.

But before Declan could even think to turn to Ryn and Bonner to tell them of their ommitance, there came a snarling roar from the trees to the east, shivering with fury through the winter with such force that many of the elves to the north and south spun to face the direction of the call.

“Orsik!” Declan and Ester hissed together.

Just as neither of them was fool enough to cry out, however, nor were they stupid enough to try and break the elves' defensive formation. Instead, they were forced to listen as the sounds of an intense battle briefly echoed through the trees, punctuated by the unseen warg's snarls and barks and howls of pain before ending with the unmistakable ripping of flesh immediately followed by the distant *thud* of something falling to the frozen earth. With bated breath they all waited, every eye not disciplined to watch their north, south, and west flanks fixed on the direction the noises had come from. Declan heard Ester muttering a prayer to her gods above, and Eyera at last broke the quiet with a pitiful whine, clawed paws crunching over the ground as she turned east to sniff at the air.

For a good fifteen seconds or so, nothing happened. The forest was silent again, and Declan felt a heavy stone start to build in his gut.

"Oh no..." he breathed, struggling to fight off the beginnings of grief that had started to join the tendrils of fear already wrapping about his heart.

Then, however, there came a whistle from a little down the line, and his and every head around him capable of doing so whipped about in time to see a heavy, grey-white form come limping from around one of the great pines just south of where they'd been looking.

"Orsik!" Declan shouted, forgoing the silence after the chaos of the unseen battle. He was bolting along the line even before Eyera had been able to gain purchase to chase after him, and by the time he reached the point of the formation closest to the warg the elves had already parted to let the animal in as they recognized him. Declan was at his head in a blink, nearly sliding across the dirty snow on his knees, and immediately started looking the male over in concern.

"By the Mother..." he growled as he accepted a whining nuzzle, Orsik burying his great head into the crook of his arm as he keened in pain.

The warg had been in worse shape, to be certain. After their fight with the drey in the tunnels, Orsik had very likely been at death's door, and would have crossed the threshold had Bonner not been there to see him back to fighting form. In comparison, the injuries he presented with now were hardly anything to be concerned with, but it wasn't the dripping blood that seeped from the wounds that alarmed Declan so, nor the animal's favoring of his front left leg.

Rather, it was the nature of the damage itself, presenting as long, narrow lacerations in parallel groupings of threes and fours, cutting deep into the warg's flesh despite his heavy, matted fur.

Claws, Declan knew. Only claws could inflict this sort of wound.

It was Ester, however, who beat him to the name, having slid down from Eyera to kneel at Orsik's right side, running a hand in line with some of the more severe gashes.

"Wight..."