

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The undead came in a single fluid wave, more and more pouring out of the broken remains of Erraven with every passing second. Declan's initial weave lit the ground beneath the gate aflame, but the fires only caught in the clothes and armor of the first lines, sending them shrieking to the ground to be trampled by the creatures that followed. There was a blaze of green light, and with a stamp of one boot Bonner turned the fifteen feet of frozen earth and grass before them to mud, discernible by the sudden sinking of the ground. More of the wights fell, splashing down to be engulfed in the sudden muck, and Declan sent out a second spell of fire in a cone over the space, setting alight to hair and flesh alike. Still, though, the others came, the shrieking screams of the draugr deafening, the beasts using the floundering bodies of their fallen like a bridge even as some of the corpses burst into black flames.

*FIRE!*

Arrackes' mind-speak rang clear through the noise, and with a physical blast of air from behind them Declan and the others experienced the terrifying feel of several hundred arrows missing their bodies and limbs by bare inches. The projectiles slammed into the coming ranks of undead, immediately sending several layers of the foremost wights into a black inferno, but the burning corpses were shoved aside and trampled on once again.

There was no time for a second volley before the creatures reached Declan and the others like a wave of living death.

An eruptive blast of heated force was all that kept Declan—and Lysiat at his side—for being overrun in the initial rush of bodies. His growing mastery of his pyromancy proved itself in the enormous energy that exploded outward from his left fist, sending a score of tightly-packed wights flying back. At his right, there was a *crack* of breaking earth, and a slab of the forest floor—now looking as hard as stone—rushed upward from beneath Bonner's feet to take his own part of the rushing line in the chest, bringing them all to a crushing halt. Almost at once, though, the pressure returned, and Declan only had enough time to draw up a second, lesser blast of power before the wights reached them.

Immediately, combat devolved into a roiling mess of claws and blades and fire.

His corpomancy pushed to its maximum, Declan felt twice as fast and twice as strong as he had ever before, standing his ground their with Lysiat. The woman's twin swords whirled in a dervish of destruction, and his single, heavier blade cleaved through limbs and heads and bodies alike. Despite the ferocity of these wights, these undead who had once lived as *er'endehn*, Declan was so far come from the man he had been when he'd *first* encountered the beasts. Then, he'd nearly lost his life battling a mere pair of them, and had required Ryn's assistance to end the fight.

He was no longer so weak.

The slashing of their bleached-white claws seemed less chaotic, less unpredictable, and Declan's obsidian blade worked a deft barrage of defense before him even as he wove flames into the onslaught, setting just as many draugr alight as he and the commander cut down combined. To his right, Tesied had taken a position, flanking Bonner opposite Aliek, the twins' long spears moving in mirrored blurs of lancing stabs and slashes. They were doing a fair job keeping the wights away from the mage, because Bonner looked to have had enough time to gather a more complicated spell in both hands, and Declan recognized the weave just in time to turn his head away and take a half step forward to mostly block Lysiat's view as well. With a roar, the column of manifested dragonfire blazed white, carving a path into the unending wights as it turned dead flesh and bone to ash. There were a dozen flashes of black flames mixed in, and that many again as Bonner dragged the spell sideways, then the magics guttered out to leave a charred cone of smoldering earth before them.

Almost at once, though, it was swallowed by twenty more bodies, the undead uncaring as their bare feet and worn boots alike blistered upon contact with the burning ground.

“So much for being ‘the bulwark,’” Declan ground out through gritted teeth as the wall of screaming corpses closed in on them once again, moving to encircle their little group. At his back, Declan heard the screams and tearing sounds of Orsik’s destructive presence, shielding their rear, coupled with the steady *thuds* of what could only be a sharp-eyed Ester sending arrow after arrow into the undead the warg didn’t manage to hold up. The wights, though seemed too intent on their target, the outpouring flood of them breaking like a rush to wrap around faster than they could be shielded.

Not until help arrived, at least.

*SHING!*

With the sound of screaming obsidian, Declan was suddenly aware of a large, dark shape standing almost back to back with him, supporting Orsik’s efforts to keep them from getting surrounded. Ryn’s great blade cut the wights down two or three at a time, and the dragon roared as he swung the weapon in one hand half-as-fast again as any human or elf might have managed with two. As though to echo this sudden arrival, there were a rapid series of the *whooshing* eruption of black flames from further to the right—close enough to hear the death wails of destroyed Purposes, this time—and Declan caught a glimpse of Arrackes and as’ahRen fighting side-by-side at Bonner’s back. Together they defended the mage, the old dragon tearing through the enemy with bare, clawed hands, the Lord Commander a maelstrom of blades as his two swords made Lysiat’s duel-wielding look like child’s play.

What’s more, they hadn’t come alone.

Apparently the fact that the wights seemed to have only one target in mind had not gone unnoticed, because with a roar and the *crunching* of bodies striking bodies, Declan and the others were abruptly no longer a lone line. The *er’endebrn* closest to them had collapsed inward, breaking their defensive positions, and all of a sudden a hundred black swords and spears were pressing in around them, cutting into the wights that had managed to ring them.

*BLOCK THEM OFF!* Ryn’s voice thundered over the sounds of battle. *ON US! ALL WHO CAN HERE THIS! COLLAPSE ON US!*

The words solidified Declan’s suspicions as he ducked under a wight’s slashing strikes, cutting its neighbor down even as he punched the offending creature itself in the gut, blasting it in two in a spray of fire. If the dragon was so willing to demand reinforcements, then there was no doubt they were indeed likely facing every undead that had been lurking within the ruins of Erraven. It had been stupid of them, he realized now, foolish of everyone—including *him*—not to have foreseen such a possibility. A thousand wights against the might of Ysenden might have seemed like grand odds, but if the Endless Queen could exact the right price from the equation, then the sacrifice on her part would have been worth it. He couldn’t fathom why *he* was the first target—not when he stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the last primordial of the dragons, the High Chancellor of the dark elves, and the greatest living mage left in the world—but all the same he understood Sehranya’s game, now.

And he had no intention of letting her win.

Drawing back his will, Declan trusted Lysiat and Tesied at his sides to shield him as he allowed his magic to converge, to weave once more into a more potent spell. It took a good four or five seconds, but his fist was aflame once more when he thrust it forward again, the *whoomph* of force blasting outward catching more wights than he could count this time. Tightly packed as the writhing mass of creatures were, very few were thrown off their feet this time, but the wall as a whole staggered back long enough to give them all a moment to breath. Taking advantage of it, Declan dropped to one knee and scrawled the only rune he knew into the already-charred gown, drawing it as quickly and broadly as he could. He cursed as the mark of channeling came out imperfect in his rush, but it would do the trick, and the lines he’d made in the ground and soot flared red when he slammed the firestone wrapped about his palm into their middle, willing them into life. Pouring as much magic as he quickly could into the rune, he was rewarded as fire erupted from the earth before him, arching away in a dozen slashing patterns like lighting to rip and tear at the legs of the wights who had already recovered. As the creatures rushed forward again, trampling the emblem, the mark held, infused as it was with magic. It

certainly didn't end the fight, but as Declan rejoined the battle he could tell there was a certain staggering to the onslaught now, just the smallest break in the constant wash of enemies as here and there flames bloomed throughout the horde whenever the weave caught in tattered clothes and worn armor.

“EXCELLENT, DECLAN!”

Bonner's shout came even as the mage let off another staggering spell, clapping his hands together before him in a gap the ay'ahSel twins had bought him. For once the ground didn't tremble, and it took Declan a moment of fearing the magics had failed before the nearest of the wight's screams took on a different tone, the hungry joy shifting into something angrier. When one of the draugr before him suddenly staggered, practically falling onto Lysiat's waiting blades, Declan looked down, then let out a harsh bark of laughter.

A thousand waving roots—like thin, snapping snakes—had come slithering out of the ground, and were actively ensnaring the feet and ankles of any undead who stepped within reach of them. Even better, the plants were catching fire as they wipped through Declan's weave, burning even as they climbed legs and dragged down the more unfortunate of the creatures. Together the two spells proved a devastating combination, the rate of the fight definitely slowing as the wights at the back of the group were suddenly forced to clamber and crawl their way over the stuck forms of their kind, not a few among them screaming as their bodies caught fire.

*KEEP AT IT!* Arrackes' voice roared over everything, the High Chancellor punching clean through the skull of one undead as he held another at bay by the throat even as he yelled. *BLOCK THEM IN!*

They were succeeding, Declan knew, were winning. As he cast a sheet of liquid fire over the writhing mass of creatures, he could see that the momentum of the wave was staggering.

Still... It wasn't without its costs.

The screams that echoed through the air, after all, weren't only the undead's. Though the mass of wights was clearly intent on getting to *him* for some reason, they appeared willing enough to strike out at whatever enemy was closest in the moment. Cruel creations that they were, they moved so quickly and with such ferocity that they sometimes threw themselves off the twisting forms of the rooted and burning, crashing down into the unsuspecting rear lines to rip and tear at everything and anything within reach. Even the sword-bearers of the forward line—collapsing steadily inward now on either side of Declan's group to bottle up the gate—were hardly going untouched, elves getting dragged into the throng of ripping claws left and right, or else falling screaming as the wights leapt at them from every direction. Even as he watched, cutting down three more of the beasts in as many seconds, Declan saw a half-dozen of the *er'endebn* fall, one particularly horribly when a creature threw itself at the women to take her by the throat in its teeth.

They would win at this rate, he knew, but they were going to pay a steep price.

And he wasn't sure they had to...

As more of the draugr erupted into red and black flames alike before him, falling prey to his and Bonner's combined weave, an idea began to form in Declan's head. It was a little bit mad, but any god looking down on the scene of the battle would have thought madness was the theme of the day already. White bone. Black blades. Red fire. Green magic. The insanity of the fight could barely have gotten more chaotic.

Barely.

He might have been wrong, but Declan suspected the Queen had made a mistake, and he was going to try to play on it. As he slashed the head of one lunging wight clean off, he called out to his left.

“RYN! CAN YOU GET ME IN THE AIR?”

As the elves had collapsed on them, bottling off the gate, the dragon and Orsik both had moved to flank Lysiat, fighting side-by-side next to the woman. He didn't answer for a few seconds, busy cleaving his great blade through the three necks of a trio of rooted wights, and only glanced around at Declan when the resulting explosion of black fire and death wails offered him a breather.

*THE AIR?!* his mental voice shouted back, sounding at a loss. *WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?*

“I NEED TO GET HIGH!” Declan answered, blasting the upper body off a draugr that had been about to leap at Tesied on his right. “ABOVE THE WIGHTS! I NEED YOU TO GET ME OVER THEIR HEADS!”

*NO!* Ryn answered as more of the creatures lunged through the black flames of their fallen ilk to press him once more.

“RYN! TRUST ME! IF I CAN GET IN THE AIR I CAN—!”

*NO! I MEAN THAT I CAN’T!* the dragon cut him off. *IF I TURN HERE, I’M LIABLE TO CRUSH EVERY ONE OF YOU, DECLAN!*

Declan cursed, realizing he was right. Ryn’s transformations were explosive. He had seen once—in one of his rare dives back into Herst’s memories—the dragon sending men screaming and flying as he erupted into his natural—and massive—state in the middle of a crowded ballroom. If he turned now, every being within several paces of Ryn—including Declan, Lysiat, Orsik, and Tesied—would be thrown off their feet in the best of circumstances, and pulverized in the worst.

*WHY DO YOU NEED TO GET IN THE AIR, IDRYS?*

The question that rang through Declan’s thoughts came not from Ryn, this time, but Arrackes. Glancing to his right, Declan saw that the lesser dragon was not looking in his direction as he continued to fight beside as’ahRen, though he’d clearly overheard the discussion.

“I THINK I CAN STOP THIS!” he shouted back without hesitating. “I THINK I CAN SEAL THEM OFF!”

*HOW?*

The voice came from both dragons, this time, and Declan didn’t waste any words in explaining. When he was done, Arrackes turned his attention on Lysiat ay’ahSel, asking her—as the only relevant witness to the concept—if it was possible.

The elven woman shouted back a confirmation at once, too intent on the fight to spare any focus on anything but the cutting pattern of her blades as she worked to hold back the onslaught of the wights still hounding after Declan.

*THEN LET IT BE DONE!* Arrackes called back, and in the corner of his vision Declan saw the High Chancellor withdraw from the fight, letting a pair of sword-wielding elves take his place beside the Lord Commander.

“BUT RYN CAN’T TURN!”

*NO, HE CAN’T!* Arrackes agreed, having vanished into the line of *er’endeahn* soldiers completely, now. *BUT I CAN!*

And then the dragon reappeared, sailing up and over the defense line, having clearly taken a running leap and mustering up all the strength in his *rb’oem*’s powerful legs.

Then, even as he arched down towards the writhing mass of wights, he began to change.

The Chancellor’s transformation was, fortunately, no less abrupt than Ryn’s were. What started as a rippling of his flesh turned into a rapid expansion outward, his black robes shredding into ribbons as his body grew and his limbs lengthened. Wings erupted out of his back, spreading wide and leathery, and his tail and neck both extended as his head widened and lengthened.

By the time he dropped among the undead again, Arrackes had taken the form of a fully-fledged dragon, and his landing shook the earth even as he crushed a score-and-a-half of the creatures under his bulk.

*QUICKLY!* The High Chancellor shouted, turning to Declan to send another fifty of the wights flying and screaming before he extended a great clawed hand towards him. *BEFORE THEY OVERRUN ME!*

His concern was valid, too. Despite his transformation, Arrackes looked only to be a little more than half of Ryn's size in his natural form, his grey scales streaked with the same dark-red slashes that had marked his dragonling's figure. Even in the moment it took him to reach for Declan, several of the wights had leapt onto his sides, gaining purchase in the ridges of his scales, and started to climb.

Fortunately, it wasn't Declan's first time being carried so, and he didn't hesitate.

Taking hold of one of the lesser dragons claws as he sheathed his sword, he vaulted at once into Arrackes' narrow palm. The moment he shouted that he was secure, the dragon reared up, shaking off most of the undead clambering up his bulk.

The rest fell when he launched himself straight up into the air.

It was an advantage to his smaller size, Declan realized as the force of the momentum nearly flattened him within the High Chancellor's grip. Whenever Ryn had taken flight, it always required a running start. Arrackes, on the other hand, managed to get them airborne with nothing but one powerful leap and several great beats of his broad wings. They hovered for a moment, the impetus of the climb cut short as gravity took hold, and below them the massive gales of wind this caused sent wights and elves alike staggering. Declan saw Ryn take hold of Lysiat's arm to stabilize her as Orsik hunkered down on his other side. Bonner had a strong hand on each of Aliek and Tesied's shoulders, and as'ahRen looked to have found his footing after a forced step or two back. Beyond them, drawing the eye as she sat atop the contrasting white-and-grey back of Eyera among the army's footsoldiers, Ester had brought the hand not holding her bow up to shield her face, squinting upward with a half-stricken, half-furious expression.

*Oh, she's going to kill me,* Declan had just enough time to realize.

Then, with a twist of his body and a shifting of his wings, Arrackes shot out of their hovering standstill over the *er'endebn*, lancing off between the trees.

Declan's stomach flipped at the sudden change of direction, and he was glad they'd all forgone breakfast that morning in favor of a quick start to the fight. It came in even more handy when Arrackes demonstrated another useful trick of his slighter frame, managing a nimble loop around one of the nearest of the great evergreens of the Vyr'esh to come arching back about towards the battle again, streaking with all speed through the air. The dragon showed no intent of slowing down as he careened over his gathered soldiers—thousand on thousands of them now waiting to be of use as they'd come running from the other sides of the broken city—and Declan braced himself, focusing twice over on his suffusion as he realized what was going to happen.

With a *CRUNCH* of shattering stone, Arrackes hit the wall along the left side of the gate with all three clawed feet not being used to carry his passenger, massive red talons cracking into the black rock to find purchase.

*Is this high enough?!* the dragon asked urgently, looking down, no longer needing to shout in the temporary subdual of the fight his takeoff had caused.

In answer, Declan peered through the High Chancellor's scaled fingers.

"Yes!" he shouted, shoving himself onto his feet. "Keep me steady! I need both hands!"

They were nearly ten yards above the still-burning ground, upon which the wights not rooted down were quickly regaining their footing. As Declan unwound the firestone from his left hand, looping the leather thong over his head again for safekeeping, he watched and hoped, pleading to the Mother and the Graces that he had been right.

His gamble paid off almost at once.

With a unanimous shriek of irritation, the general direction of the horde shifted, all but the outmost lines of the pooling wights pulling back and away, fighting the tide of the still-coming others pouring out of the city. Those closest to the wall immediately leapt at it, bony fingers gaining poor purchase on the wind-weather stone,

but all the same several managed to start the climb upwards while others simply began clambering up and over their lower comrades' heads and shoulder, building a quickly mounting mound.

It was exactly what Declan had hoped for.

They needed to cut the enemy off, to keep them from streaming out of Erraven in an endless wave. If he could break up the onrush, then the press of the undead would lessen ten-fold, maybe even causing the remainder to scatter in search of other exits. Most importantly: the toll on the elves would decrease proportionally.

As arrows began to fire off from the back ranks of elven archers again, picking the ascending wights off the wall in quick succession, Declan brought both arms up, palms towards the pooling undead and already-enchanted ground beneath them, and began to focus.

He had intended—with the control he'd built up over his pyromancy in the last month—to draw from his reserves more carefully than the last time he called on a similar spell. In the tunnels beneath the Mother's Tears, willing his magic out of himself without the firestone as a vessel had been like opening the flood gates of a dam and pressing the water to move out faster and faster just the same. With the practice he'd put into controlling his weaving without a focusing element, he had expected that he would be able to manage much the same while still holding greater reign on his power.

Unfortunately, while Declan wasn't wrong about his improved manipulation, he failed to account for another aspect of his weaving that—it turned out—had grown in equally measure and demand.

Potency.

Where the roughened rock of the tunnels had taken time to heat and melt, the stone beneath where he and Arrackes hung began to glow almost the moment he let loose his will. The screams of the wights—some of whom had managed to climb to within five feet of the dragon's lowest foot despite the constant rush of arrows—turned hateful again as the flesh about their bone claws erupted into instant flame, sending most of the undead falling away. Declan was hardly finished, though, pressing the power further and more firmly as he drew it into existence, the stone of the gate under them turning orange foot-by-rapid-foot.

Then the unseen magics hit the ground, and the earth itself caught fire.

With a roar of rising smoke and heat an inferno exploded into instant being, feeding off the flames of the channeling rune Declan had left behind and the roots of Bonner's still-active trapping spell. It expanded, ripping out and into the city alike, consuming every corpse it touched, pulling them into the embrace of the flames like the drowning undercurrent of some great wave. As he poured his magic into the spell, Declan almost didn't notice the fires expanding too fast, too far, realizing only in the seconds before they would have engulfed the closest of the elves, the soldiers now scrambling away from the fight with yells of fear and surprise.

"N-No!" Declan managed to get out through clenched teeth, letting loose even more power to reign in what he'd already released. His control proved itself as the fires slowed significantly, but they still crept outwards, spilling over the last of the wights who'd made it out of the city. Declan feared, then, that he was about to enact the great horror of setting the Vyr'esh aflame, the *exact* reason Ryn and Arrackes had not let free their dragonfire.

Then, though, there came a blaze of blue light, and Declan felt the air—heated to the point of boiling—drop suddenly in temperature again.

With no noticeable sound over the roar of the inferno, a wall of ice some three feet thick began to materialize between the elves and the flames. It grew slowly, one yard at a time around the perimeter where the incinerated wights had stood, but it still outpaced the flames. Within fifteen seconds the army was safe behind the magic barrier, and Bonner—who had traced the frozen defenses into being with both hands from where he'd been standing at the very edge of the flames, grimaced as the strain of the act left him.

That was nothing, however, compared to what Declan was feeling.

As the stone of the wall beneath him and Arrackes began to melt, a corner of the gate sloughing off as molten rock, Declan felt the familiar—and unpleasant—sense of scraping the bottom of his reserves. Ignoring it—and the knowledge that Bonner was *certainly* going to yell at him later for this—Declan dragged his magic away, finding it easier now that they were limited by the physical presence of the ice wall. Like the tide rolling back out to sea, he exerted his control to press the weave through the gate and into the city, willing it to swallow as many of the shrieking wights still gathered there as he felt his spells of suffusion being drained away into the pyromancy. His arms began to shake, then his legs a few seconds after. Before he knew it, Declan had fallen to one knee in Arrackes' palm, nearly losing his balance completely.

Then his vision began to darken, and Declan cursed himself.

“Well... shit,” he muttered, fighting to keep his head up and the magic still pouring outward. “This wasn't part of the plan...”

As a heavy exhaustion pulled at him, dragging him down, Declan felt the weave begin to unravel. He battled it, of course, struggling mightily to focus, to will the wights he could still see through the gates to run, to flee. Strangely, there seemed to be less of them than there had been before, but he didn't recall seeing any of them make a break for the other parts of the wall, the cracks in Erraven's ancient defenses that would have given them another egress by which to attack from.

It didn't matter a moment later, though, when Declan lost the fight, feeling himself nearing the very last spark of his magics.

With an enormous effort he forced himself to stop, then, forced himself to release his hold on the wild weave. He retched as he cut himself off from the power, finding himself left with an emptiness inside his being he didn't think he'd had a the chance to experience the last time before passing out.

And speaking of passing out...

“Arrackes...” Declan said weakly, the black closing in around his vision.

... *Yes?* the dragon answered after a moment, sounding—for the first time—just the smallest bit stunned by what he had just witnessed.

“Catch... me...” Declan muttered.

Then he felt himself tilt sideways, off the dragon's hand, tipping out over the blazing hell that still raged below.

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Declan awoke to a sensation not unlike the feeling of his heart stopping. A keen discomfort—just short of pain—blazed outward from the center of his chest, tingling in a wave to first paralyze his lungs, then seize up his shoulders, neck, and abdomen. It continued to travel up his head and down his arms and legs, and only after it passed through his fingers and toes and faded from existence did he open his eyes with a desperate gasp for air.

A cold, blue sky greeted him, bright in the early morning sun. Contrary to the horrible sensation that had only just coursed through his body like fire, Declan could see his breath on the air, and he lay there panting for a good while before realizing someone was looking down at him, while others were talking nearby.

“Is he awake?!” Ester's desperate voice was recognizable even through a ringing in his ears. “Is he awake, Father?!”

The face of the figure directly above Declan came into focus, then, and Bonner's green eyes smiled down on him.

“He’s awake,” the old mage said before addressing Declan directly. “I thought we agreed you never wanted me to do that to you again, boy.”

In answer, Declan only groaned, trying and failing to sit up. Immediately the familiar grasp of a strong, clawed hand took him by the shoulder, easing him into a sitting position, and he blinked blearily around to see Ryn on one knee at his other side.

*Take it easy, the dragon said gently. This is twice now you’ve pushed yourself into an arcane fatigue. You know it’s going to take time to recover.*

That brought reality back a bit, and Declan lifted a shaking hand up to the middle of his chest, where he knew now Bonner’s finger had likely been pressed only a moment before.

“Oooowww,” he hissed, feeling the phantom remnants of the injection of magic tingle down his back. “That *definitely* wasn’t part of the plan...”

“A plan? So you’re going to pretend you had a plan?”

Wincing at the cool tone with which the questions were asked, Declan looked up. Ester was on both knees by his feet, glaring at him with a combination of fury and relief.

“Er... Sort of?” Declan answered sheepishly. “Passing out wasn’t in the program, though, I promise. That spell... It took more out of me than I anticipated.”

“I’ll say,” came a rumbling voice from the right, and Declan turned his stiff neck to find Ciriak as’ahRen watching him from behind Bonner with a raised eyebrow. At his side, Arrackes stood silent, taken once more to his *rh’eem* and having apparently been fetched a spare set of robes from somewhere. He looked exhausted—they *all* looked exhausted—but no one seemed to have suffered any major injuries, and beyond the Lord Commander and his Chancellor an innumerable number of elven soldiers were milling about, looking to be patrolling the walls and searching the ruins for—

“Wait,” Declan said abruptly, waking up fully now as he realized what he was seeing. “Hold on.”

He supposed he should have guessed it at the sight of the sky, but he was obviously no longer beneath the cover of the Vyr’esh. On the contrary, he sat in a clear patch of grass not far from what could only be the crumbled remnants of part of Erraven, *inside* the city walls. Someone had taken his helmet off, too, his long hair sticking to the sweat of his forehead and cheeks as the winter breeze cut down from the open heavens above.

*We won, Declan, Ryn answered his unasked question with a chuckle. I would almost say you won, rather, but there was still some cleanup to be done after you decimated the nights.*

“After I... what now?” Declan blinked, looking around at all of them, not understanding.

Ester answered him with an angry punch to the bottom of one boot. “You burned them all to nothing, Declan,” she hissed as though this *wasn’t* excellent news. “Well, most of them. Nearly took us all, too—and yourself, at the end—but you burned them all.”

This still didn’t register, and Declan looked around blankly at the others. For the first time he noticed Lysiat ay’ahSel and her brothers standing not far away, the lot of them looking on as the commander petted a seated, panting Eyera and the twins held back a whining Orsik who seemed to be trying to get to Declan. Unable to do more than blink at them, though, it was Arrackes who he finally turned to, Arrackes, who had borne witness most closely to his spell.

*It’s as they say, the older dragon told him tiredly, anticipating the question just as Ryn had. I wouldn’t believe it if I hadn’t seen it myself, Idrys. Not in seven hundred years have I seen a human cast a spell of fire like that.*

*The last would have been Amberst, Ryn himself agreed with a nod, still not having let go of Declan’s shoulder. I would know. You’ve come a long, long way, Declan.*



“Don’t go giving him a big head, now!” Bonner cut in with a disapproving frown. “Herst—much less Elysia—could have cast that weave without breaking a sweat, not to mention controlled it better.”

“Father, give him a break.” Ester, despite her anger with Declan, was apparently just as ready to jump to his defense as she looked prepared to punch him in a much more delicate place than his foot. “Who knows how many more would have died if he hadn’t done that!”

“I’m hardly criticizing him, Esteria,” Bonner said, a little more gently this time. “I’m merely saying that he still has much to learn.”

“Clearly...” Declan muttered, still not believing his years. “Can someone explain, though... I... What happened?”

“A rout.”

It was as’ahRen who answered, white-red eyes taking Declan in carefully as he spoke.

“We estimate there were about five hundred left when you two—” he gestured briefly to the dragon beside him “—took to the air. After you were done—and Arrackes caught you—there weren’t more than a third that number, and they came spilling out over what you’d left of the gate just like the rest of them.”

Declan nodded, understanding as he turned to look past Ester. Beyond her, the gates of Erraven still stood, but a black, shallow crater was all that remained of the vestiges of the cobbled stone road that had lead into the city. Indeed, it was still smoking, which told Declan he couldn’t have been unconscious for too long.

“I guess a Purpose has its limits...” he muttered. “Did they keep after me, even after I passed out?”

*They did, Arrackes answered this time. Not a few of them burned their limbs to nothing trying to climb up to us. Once the ground cooled I ended up taking us back behind the army line.*

“There were so many spears by that point that they didn’t stand a chance when they rushed after you,” Ester finished for the High Chancellor. “I saw it all happen. They threw themselves on the blades like there was nothing more important than getting to you.”

“I don’t think there was,” Declan said with a shake of his head. “I think Sehranya *knew* there wasn’t a chance this fight would go her way, so she went for the win she could have. Why she went after *me*, though, I don’t understand. Is it the Accord?” He looked to Bonner. “Does she think there’s value in seeing me dead?”

The old mage frowned uncertainly. “... Possibly. As I’ve said, it seems doubtful *you* would be bound by the weave, though. You’re descended from the *second* child of Igoric al’Dyor, and we’re a fair few generations even from Herst...”

*Then why?* Ryn asked. *Why would is she so intent on seeing Declan dead?*

Bonner shrugged, obviously at a loss. “Haven’t we been asking ourselves that for months now? It’s possible Declan *is* connected to the Accord, which might explain it, but I’d have to examine the weave’s vessel in Aletha to be sure. Even if he *is*, for some reason, he can’t be as integral to it as Mathaleus and his family...”

“You think she perceives this Accord of yours as that much of a threat?” as’ahRen asked with surprising interest, looking between Bonner and Declan. “Sehranya?”

“She should,” the old man answered with a huff. “I’ll not have this argument again here, though, Lord Commander.”

*That would be for the best, I think, yes, Arrackes agreed, frowning at as’ahRen as though disappointed by the elf’s question. We have other matters to attend to, namely returning to Ysenden.*

“Of course,” the Lord Commander said without looking at his Chancellor, eyes having come to a rest on Declan again. “If it’s agreeable to all, however, I’d like a word with Idrys.”

There was a general exchange of curious looks at this.

*Regarding...*? Ryn asked finally.

“The fact that his magic isn’t the only area in which he might still see improvement,” the elf answered.

Despite the cryptic response, Ryn appeared to get the message, because he pressed himself to his feet at once.

*Bonner, there are wounded you should attend to,* he said firmly, stepping around Declan to take the old man by the arm and pull him to his feet. *Ester, you come too.*

“Esteria may stay,” as’ahRen countered, looking away from Declan at last. “If you would, in fact, send Commander ay’ahSel over as well. And her brothers.”

Ryn nodded, then proceeded to start dragging away a protesting Bonner, who was shouting after why *he* had to leave when his *daughter* was allowed to stay.

Declan was about to ask the same thing, in fact, but then Ryn’s passing of the ay’ahSels had him immediately being barreled at by several hundred pounds of muscle, teeth, and dirty, matted fur.

“Oomph!” he gasped as Orsik’s broad snout slammed eagerly into his sore chest, flattening him back to the ground. From there, Declan could only laugh as the warg leapt and danced around his head, licking his neck and face energetically as he barked with excitement.

“Orsik! Off! *Off!* He needs to rest!”

Ester’s concerned command had the animal pausing in his happy assault, just long enough for Declan to shove himself up again to safety. As he put a grateful hand on the warg’s head, he looked around to see that Eyera had come to lay beside the still-kneeling half-elf, while Lysiat, Aliek, and Tesied were now standing at attention on Declan’s left, opposite the Lord Commander. Only Tesied dared shoot him a wink that said ‘glad you’re not dead’ before returning to his emotionless countenance.

as’ah’Ren didn’t waste any time.

“Esteria, if you would translate for the ay’ahSels, I would speak in common for the time being.” He waited then for Ester to climb to her feet and come to stand at the ready beside the dark elves before continuing. “Each of you all deserve praise for your acts this day. Idrys’ goes without saying, but I think he would agree it’s fair to assume he wouldn’t have survived long enough to come up with the plan without the four of you watching his back.” The Lord Commander paused a moment to let Ester turn his words, then kept on. “That being said, I have to echo Magus yr’Essel that there is much improvement to be made, on all of your parts. Criticism is for another day, I think, but there is never any time like the present to seize an opportunity to improve.” He looked specifically to Declan. “I saw it. Your ‘suffusion’. You fought with very nearly the speed of Commander ay’ahSel, and twice her power. What you need now is precision. Practice.”

Declan felt something like anticipation pull at his throat, but he beat back the hope. No... It wasn’t possible... Was it?

“As you may or may not know,” the Lord Commander continued, “I oversee the training of the High Chancellor’s Guard, ensuring that the best of our kind receive the highest level of attention. However, I have not personally trained any soldier of the *er’endebrn* since Mysat.”

Declan swallowed, now, not believing where this conversation was going.

Before them all, as’ahRen smiled, the expression at once warm and infinitely, unfathomably terrifying.

“I think—as proven by your acts today—and as a favor to an old, old friend,” the Lord Commander met Declan’s eye specifically, “it is past time I changed that. What say you all?”

There was a heavy moment of silence, Declan and Ester in disbelief until Aliek nudged the half-elf pointedly, asking for the translation her surprise had kept her from providing.

For the first time since meeting the siblings, the woman's words had each and every one of them looking utterly dumbfounded.

"*Sir...*" Lysiat's hesitant question sounded like a child trying desperately not to shout for glee. "*Are you offering to... to train us? All of us?*"

In answer, as'ahRen's smile broadened, and the elation combined with the chill of fear redoubled in Declan's chest.

"Spirits protect you if you say yes, ay'ahSel."