

Excerpt from Chapter 8 of *The Last Halfling*:

“Welcome to Ebonheart,” Arden said, his tone softer now.

Chloe didn’t respond. Her mind was spinning too fast, her thoughts tangling into knots she couldn’t untie. A halfling. That’s what Arden had called her. The word echoed in her mind, heavy with implications she couldn’t fully grasp. Questions crowded her thoughts, each more unsettling than the last. For a moment, she felt as though the ground beneath her might crumble.

Then her breath caught as the path they were walking opened into a massive, yawning expanse.

Ebonheart unfolded before her like a vision from another dimension. Enormous stone arches stretched across the cavern, their surfaces intricately carved with patterns that seemed to tell stories of ages long past. Towers of polished obsidian and smooth granite rose toward the ceiling, their peaks adorned with glimmering crystals that reflected the glow of torches and phosphorescent moss.

The city seemed alive, its streets winding like veins through the cavern floor, bustling with movement and flickering with the warm light of oil lamps. Water cascaded down one side of the cavern, forming a shimmering underground river that wove through the city like a thread of silver.

Chloe’s mouth fell open. She stepped forward, her boots echoing faintly on the smooth stone path as she tried to take it all in. “How...” she whispered, her voice barely audible. “How is this even possible?”

Arden stepped beside her, his gaze sweeping over the city with something close to reverence. “It’s a marvel, isn’t it? Centuries of craftsmanship, passed down and perfected. Every stone, every carving—done by hand. Ebonheart is the pride of those who refused to bow to the surface world’s tyranny.”

Chloe felt a lump rise in her throat. It wasn’t just the sheer size of the underground city that overwhelmed her—it was the realization that people had built this, not machines, carving it out of the unforgiving stone, and turning it into something breathtaking.

“It’s beautiful,” she said, her voice trembling with awe. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Matthau, who had been silent until now, chuckled softly. “And you thought Aegis was impressive.” He gave her a crooked grin. “Ebonheart makes Aegis look like a pile of rubble.”

Chloe managed a faint laugh, though her eyes remained wide, her thoughts spinning between admiration and disbelief. The city was more than a refuge; it was a testament to what humans could achieve even in the face of impossible odds. And as the weight of that realization settled over her, she couldn’t help but wonder if she would ever belong in a place like this.