

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

*“You’ve never lost a fight before, have you, lad? No... No, it doesn’t seem so. Well, bear this: you are not the strongest. You are not the fastest. Chances are, you never will be. That’s alright, though.*

*If you were the best, then what would there be left to learn?”*

-Cassandra Sert, Iron Wind Guildmaster,  
to a defeated Declan Idrys,  
1057p.f.

Suffering from a nearly-constant case of *deja vu* was one of the stranger things Declan had ever experienced in his life. Odder still, the feeling of having been where he stood previously came not from his own memories, but rather from someone else’s, adding to his muddled concentration. Despite everything—despite the cold breeze and the trees and the impenetrable grey of the now-darkening clouds that had ever-masked the sky since they’d left Ysenden two days prior—he kept seeing flashes of sunlight and a bright stone courtyard, like a ghostly scene interposed over the cleared patch of ground between the evergreens of the Vyr’esh that formed his *actual* surroundings.

Maybe it had something to do with the bare-chested elf ducking and weaving before Declan like dark water made solid, sword held by hilt and sheath at his back to solidify his handicap.

Seemingly impervious to the cold, Ciriak as’ahRen danced about the makeshift ring in silence as Declan did his best to strike the elf with the wooden practice sword the Lord Commander had surprised him with at the noon break their first day of the march, apparently having brought it along for just this purpose. It was their fourth time sparring like this, now, and the relative quiet of the “match” was echoed by the spectators, a good number of elves on break from their duties, along with Ryn, Bonner, and Ester as always. Lysiat, too, was present—she and her brothers having been the only ones of Colonel Syr’esh’s command allowed to accompany the army after their request for exception had been allowed by as’ahRen himself—but Aliek and Tesied were either on sentry duty or helping the cooks distribute the march’s evening meal.

Slashing horizontally at the Lord Commander’s bare chest, Declan was unsurprised when the wooden blade was dodged with less than an inch of space between weapon and scarred skin. Unperturbed, he turned the cut into a spinning kick, hoping to catch his opponent in the gut since the elf had leaned back to avoid the blow, exposing his midriff. as’ahRen, of course, was far too quick for him, and twisted away so that Declan’s boot caught only air. There would have been a time where such a miss might have left him flat-footed, but even the few spare weeks in Lysiat’s care had carved Declan into a different kind of fighter, and he landed balanced even as his sword led the way again.

It didn’t hurt, too, that Bonner had kept to his word and allowed him to start using a quarter of his corpomancy proficiency even in training, now.

Declan might have been mistaken, but he thought he caught a few mutterings of surprise from among the observing *er’endehn*, and he could just imagine Lysiat forcing down a smirk of pride from where she was seated with Ester, their backs to the trunk of a young pine tree. Ignoring it all, he kept after the Lord Commander, not letting up despite knowing it would take a miracle to land so much as a single blow on the elf. Ciriak as’ahRen, unsurprisingly, had proven himself a duelist of an ability unlike Declan had ever seen.

And that was without ever having actually *drawn his sword*.

It wasn't just the clear skill and discipline of the *er'endebln* that had been drilled into the Lord Commander as harshly as every dark elf. It wasn't just his body, carved—despite his age—into a lithe sculpture of corded muscle that rippled beneath countless scars with every motion. as'ahRen had something more, more even than Lysiat, and *far* more than Cassandra Sert had possessed. His eyes flew over Declan what felt like a dozen times a second, taking him in with a concentration that seemed both natural and yet acutely deliberate. His every move was never merely a response to Declan's actions, but rather a preparation for the next, like the elf could read the motions of the wooden sword two or three strikes ahead of time based purely on his opponent's stance and initiating blows. It felt, to Declan, like the Lord Commander never approached their practices as a mere combatant in a common dual, but rather as a general might treat a war, planning every decision with contingencies upon contingencies, until his enemy was rarely left with any surprises to offer.

It was at once disheartening and exhilarating to behold.

*I've still got a long, long way to go*, Declan thought to himself—not even for the first time in that single fight—going for a straight stab at as'ahRen's neck that he turned into a diagonal slash up at the side of the elf's head.

The Lord Commander dropped out from under it with the same elegance a tactful courtier might bow before a king.

For another ten minutes or so they kept on like that, going non-stop, Declan chasing the aged officer around their cleared circle in silence other than the panting sounds of his own breaths. Eventually even the Lord Commander started to breathe heavily along with him, and Declan drove himself harder, seeking to take advantage of the elf's fatigue if he could. He was careful not to let his slashes and cuts go wild, but he pressed them just the same, seeking more speed, more strength behind each blow. Even if he kept his promise to Bonner not to draw too much magic into his body, he could still push his limbs themselves to their limits. Declan swore to himself, as as'ahRen jerked his head to whip the sweat from his eyes, that he wouldn't stop until the elf gave up a point or *he* was on the ground gasping for—

*Clack! WHAM!*

As Declan's sword came down in a vertical arc, the Lord Commander brought his own weapon out from behind his back at long last, still holding it by the neck of its sheath as he snapped it upward. Declan's blade caught in the angle of the handle and cross-guard, but before he could even begin to retract it as'ahRen had moved to one side, dragging the wooden sword down and outward with him. As Declan's outstretched arm continued to descend, the Lord Commander brought his free hand up to take him by the back of the neck, then promptly drove a knee up into his gut. The air exploded out of Declan's lungs in a rush as he bent double.

And then he was flying, the elf—in a movement only possible by a body that possessed both immense strength *and* flexibility—twisting to flip him over the lifted knee and slam him to his back on the ground.

Declan coughed and wheezed, his whole body spasming under the shock of the impact as he lay on the frozen grass. Bonner had been kind enough to clear the snow and pine needles for their bout, but Declan wasn't sure he was grateful now, lying on the hard-packed earth. His vision spun, and he felt the weave of suffusion slip away as he lost himself for a moment, trying to regain his bearings.

When the dim glow of the canopy above finally stopped turning, he found himself looking up into a dark, bearded face that was nodding in what might have been approval.

"I've decided: you are quiet the terror for a human, Idrys," the Lord Commander praised him, looking away just long enough to accept a shirt as an attendant—a small, slender elf woman in the white armor of the Chancellor's Guard—ran it over to him from the sidelines. "You might even make a match for some of our trainees, with skills like that."

"Y-you start training as soon as your kind can l-lift a sword," Declan croaked, unwilling to get up just yet. Somehow he'd managed to hold onto his practice weapon, and he brought the wooden blade shakily up in a mock salute to the Lord Commander. "W-wouldn't that make your trainees ten years old or s-so?"

as'ahRen smirked at him, having handed his sheathed weapon to his attendant so he could pull the shirt on.

"The average starting age is six, but you can do better than that." He looked to the woman at his side as he began lacing up the collar of the shirt. "What do you think, Mysat? Could Declan handle himself against a ten-year-old *er'endehn*?"

In answer, of course, the Guard—who Declan thought was a Major if he was judging the patterns in the gold accents of her armor correctly—stared at her superior blankly.

"Ah, right," as'ahRel muttered, looking a little abashed. "It's been so long since I've had the opportunity to speak common that I'm getting carried away."

As Declan finally decided to give sitting up a shot, the Lord Commander repeated the question in elvish, receiving a prompt—if flat—reply, which got a laugh out of the older elf.

"Mysat says that—"

"That I would do better starting with the unarmed infants," Declan finished for the Lord Commander, grunting as he used his practice blade to leverage himself to his feet. "Yes, I understood that." He turned and shot the petite major a glare that wasn't so much as acknowledged. "Any minute we haven't had for training, Ryn and Bonner have been forcing me to spend on your tongue these last five days, in case we get separated during the battle. Pleasantly, thus far I have only had the opportunity to better understand the insults that have been thrown my way."

"Oh she means nothing by it," as'ahRen told him, taking the sword from "Mysat" again and indicating that she was dismissed with a nod. As the major bowed and departed again, the Lord Commander started binding the weapon back to his belt, where it always hung unless they were sparring. "If anything I expect she's just loathe to give you credit. You have a knack for the blade I think most of my soldiers find alarming, given your... uh... heritage." He looked Declan up and down pointedly.

*I would remind you that it was that 'heritage' that led you to request these fights in the first place, Lord Commander.*

Declan and as'ahRel both looked around to see Ryn, Bonner, Ester, and Lysiat approaching together from the opposite side of the clearing Major Mysat had already departed from. The commander looked like she was working hard not to beam as brightly as the yr'Essels both were, leaving only the dragon to take Declan in with a more-reasoned pride.

*That was well fought. Even at a quarter of your suffusion, you got close a few times, I think.*

Beside Declan, as'ahRen frowned.

"A quarter of his suffusion?" he echoed questioningly.

It made sense, Declan, realized, that the Lord Commander wouldn't know. Their last three matches—the midday and evening breaks of the previous day's march, as well as their earlier noon bout—had always had the old elf getting swept away on officer's business the moment their sparring was at an end. This afternoon, however, the army had halted early once they'd gotten within two miles of Erraven—not wanting their assault on the city to follow up a full two-days at double-pace without reprieve—allowing as'ahRen to linger a little longer.

It was, surprisingly, Lysiat who answered the Lord Commander's question, and Declan's steadily-improving grasp of the tongue allowed him to catch most of it.

"It's my understanding that Declan has been limited by his teacher on how much he can strengthen himself with magic," she told the Lord Commander, motioning to Bonner as she did. "For the purposes of training his body."

The Lord Commander looked impressed, turning to Declan again. "I see. So that was hardly the best you had. Part of me wants to demand a rematch, now."

“Perhaps another time, as’ahRel,” Bonner cut in before Declan could fervently agree on the spot. “I don’t believe either of you has suppered, and the evening grows late. I’ve no doubt the council will want to review our battle plan once again before we march at dawn.”

“Bah,” the Lord Commander grumbled in answer, though he did glance guiltily to the north, where the army proper lay beyond the scattered elves who’d lingered after the fight was done, likely hoping for another bout. “They can revisit it as much as they like, but unless our information changes there’s nothing to adapt. The strategy was decided within the hour of Sen’Hev returning to Ysenden. The lot of them just want to feel self-important by spinning their wheels.”

Declan and the others had been present for General Sen’Hev’s account, the evening before their departure, so it was hard to disagree with the Lord Commander. She’d reported nothing overtly alarming, but it had still been a blow to every member of the council present—the spymaster Ryven had made her excuses through Syr’esh, as she’d apparently already immersed herself into the investigation of the Ysenden populace—that Erraven had indeed been overrun by Sehranya’s wights. Sen’Hev had told them it had been trickier than expected to confirm at first, because the draugr appeared to have had a need to hide themselves woven into their Purpose. Even from up close the abandoned city had seemed like little more than an empty shell, likely hardly threatening to the exiles who’d flocked to the ancient seat of power with the expectations of starting life anew free of Ysenden’s influence. Only when one of Sen’Hev’s quickest lookouts had volunteered to approach the city more openly, in fact, had the dark elves confirmed the presence of the undead.

Then, however, it had been established without doubt when several hundred of the creatures had come pouring out of the stone and rubble to give chase to the scout, hounding the unit as a whole for more than a dozen miles before the general and her “eyes”, as she called them, had put enough distance between them to shake the draugr.

“Be that as it may,” Bonner responded diplomatically, “while *you* can afford to irritate the council, I’m afraid we cannot. You and Arrackes have left us with little option to plead our case to them directly, once this matter of Erraven is handled, so we cannot allow ourselves to fall out of grace with the generals.”

Declan saw Ester leaning over to translate for Lysiat as the Lord Commander snorted at this.

“I would concern myself first and foremost with *obtaining* their grace before worrying about falling out of it, Magus.” He motioned northward, towards the camp. “But as you wish. Lead the way, and let us see if my slinking off to trade blows with Idrys has risked your so-‘stellar’ reputation.”

“Did we trade blows?” Declan asked with a chuckle, reaching back to brush dirt off the rear off his pants. “I seem to recall that match being less exciting than that.”

as’ahRel smirked at him as Bonner indeed started making for the trees, followed closely by Ester and Lysiat. “I’m giving you credit for the attempt, boy. Take it or leave it.”

“I’ll take it!” Declan declared at once, earning a snort of laughter from Ryn as the three of them fell in behind the two women.

It wasn’t a far walk to the encampment—Major Mysat had looked ready to rip the Lord Commander’s head off when he’d suggested they hike to find a quieter spot outside the sentry ring—and even less time before the lights of the base were visible through the trees. Cresting a steep hill that had Declan, Ryn, and Bonner using stones and passing trunks to get up, the moonwing lanterns that supplemented the fading grey of the sun through the trees above came into view first, and half a minute later the lot of them had entered the camp proper and the bustle and boil that accompanied it. As ever, even the lowest ranked among the elves moved with impressive efficiency in and around each other, pitching tents, starting up the collapsable braziers to provide more light, and cooking and handing out the supper rations from beneath large, plain awnings of black cloth. It said something about the effectiveness and ability of the *er’endebln* that Declan didn’t notice much different between this war camp and the forward base that had hosted Colonel Syr’esh’s two hundred men along the south edge of the Vyr’esh, weeks ago now.

Except, of course, for one stark contrast:

The sheer size of the place.

As they crossed through the alleys formed by the hundreds on hundreds of tents, whole contingents of soldiers on patrol split to let them through. It seemed, too, that with every passing minute the darkness beneath the trees was being chased further and further away, because where Syr'esh's command had borne dozens of braziers, the host around them was setting alight their *thousands*. The noise of the place was astonishing, too, the vastness of the woods not enough to swallow the shouts and the thumps of booted feet, and after a minute of walking and dodging moving elves, Declan could no longer look in any direction without seeing a sea of moving soldiers and erected tent tops. It was fortunate, actually, that it was their third day marching with Ysenden's army.

When they'd first laid eyes on the thirty thousand *er'endebln*, gathered and waiting in the massive ring of stone that had surrounded the *yr'es* of the city's middle sanctum, even Ryn had muttered a word of awe, while Bonner, Ester, and Declan had all stared in open amazement.

“*Lord Commander!*”

If the shouted greetings of the sentries a few minutes later had not informed Declan they'd arrived at their destination, the now-familiar shapes of the general's pavilions would certainly have done the trick. While only as subtly ornate as Syr'esh's had been, the tents were each about a half-again as large as the colonel's, and arranged in a wide, circular pattern around the largest swath of relatively-flat ground the soldiers had been able to find. Even then, however, they could not avoid the forest entirely, because a tree that had to be some thirty feet wide towered up from one side of the inner ring. As they passed through the dense sentry line and between the general's quarters, though, it was not this titanous evergreen that Declan and the others kept their attention on, having all of them now spent too long within the Vyr'esh to be much astonished by even this colossal specimen.

Rather, it was the High Chancellor's pavilion that everyone couldn't help but take in, no matter how many times they had done so before.

To call the space Arrackes' alone, of course, would have been unfair. While it did indeed house the dragon's sleeping and personal “chambers”, it was also the host to the council's traveling war room, its massive partition forming the body of the three-part tent. As a result, the pavilion loomed larger and broader than any three of the general's combined, though the gold gilding on black was still of the typical *er'endebln* subtlety. The only extra adornment, in fact, came in the form of the hammered-brass emblem—about the size of Declan's body—that crested the peak of the center section, the sword and bow of Ysenden glimmering brightly in the growing light of the camp's fires.

Another dozen sentries—dressed this time in the white-and-gold of the Chancellor's Guard—saluted as'ahRen as the Lord Commander took the lead at last, passing Ester and Lysiat to wave off the soldier who'd stepped towards the massive entrance flaps of Arrackes' pavilion the moment they'd approached. Closing the last few yards, Declan started to make out the sounds of heated discussion from within, and when as'ahRen pulled open to lead the way inside, the voices rose proportionately.

An additional five days of near-nonstop lessons in the *er'endebln* tongue had indeed improved Declan's grasp of the language, but not so much that he could deduce anything valuable from the jumbled quips and arguments that filled the room the lot of them stepped into after the Lord Commander. The space was massive for a tent—reminding Declan of the circuses that popped up seasonally here and their throughout Aletha—with a lit brazier in each corner of the mat-covered floor to illuminate the dark interior. A trio of long, foot-thick struts of wood formed a central support, holding up the canvas high above them to jut through a hole out which the smoke from the fires was being swiftly carried. In the middle of the space, around these posts, a circular table comprised of four rounded sections was covered in what looked like every map and architectural sketch Ysenden had held in its archives, ranging from altitude breakdowns to drawings Declan knew to be Erraven itself, both before and after its fall.

And, of course, over and around this gathering of information, the generals themselves stood.

It had taken some time—usually in the midst of his language lessons—but Declan had eventually learned the names of the council members by heart, and recognized most of the faces that turned to them as they stepped into the tent. Lessan Sen'Hev, the scout commander, was easily distinguished by her scowl, as was old Beh'lys Hayle, master of records, who had accompanied them to ensure the safety of the very documents now lain about the table. A few were missing—Sureht Syr'esh and the spymaster, Yl'ah Ryvus, were hunting for traitors in Ysenden, and the master of city development, May'lek ed'Vyn, had had duties to maintain—but for the most part all the rest were gathered, their expressions at the sight of the arriving Lord Commander ranging from frustration to placidity to relief. Sylak Ehst, commander of the archery divisions. Kest Dahn'Ys, responsible for provisions and sustenance. Even Kanon Vets, master of the medical and relief contingents, was present, having entrusted his hospital ward in the city to a handful of trusted seconds.

And, black-red horns rising above all of them, Arrackes stood leaning over the closest part of the table with his back to all, head moving steadily left to right while he took in the maps for what Declan knew had to have been the hundredth time.

*“General Sen'Hev, has there been any news?”*

Declan barely caught as'ahRen's words, the Lord General's voice raised to be heard over the cacophony of the council as he strode forward. At the question, those officers who hadn't yet noticed their arrival looked around, and the arguments settled at once. As the scout commander turned to her superior to answer, Lysiat held Declan and the others back with a raised arm, motioning with a sign and a slight shake of her head that they shouldn't approach further without permission.

*“None, Lord Commander.”* General Sen'Hev's answer felt almost too-loud in the sudden quiet of the pavilion. *“No movement.”*

as'ahRen sighed, coming to a stop at the edge of the gathered generals, and Declan's still-limited understanding finally failed him when the elf answered even as he raised a hand to rub at his temples.

Fortunately, Ester was quick on stepping back to translate for him, as was her habit.

*“Then would someone care to explain to me what the meaning is behind this uproar?”* the Lord General had responded. *“We could practically hear the lot of you shouting at each other from the edge of camp. If there have been no developments, why are we gathering to debate once again?”*

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence at this, with a few of the generals—most among those of Erraven blood, unsurprisingly—glancing at each other across the room.

*Some are still not satisfied with the current battle plan,* Arrackes at last spoke up, turning around as he did, the tinge of impatience in the old dragon's voice speaking to the fact that he, too, was tiring of what had become a nightly event since leaving Ysenden. *There are continued concerns of 'needless disturbance'.*

Had Declan thought it not wholly inappropriate, he would have rolled his eyes right along with Bonner, then, the mage never having been much for decorum. It was the same song and dance they'd played along to every time they met, with undoubtedly similar players involved yet again. Sure enough, Beh'lys Hayle seemed particularly unwilling to meet the Lord Commander's frown in that moment, apparently very suddenly taken with an outline of what Declan thought was the tree density around the Erraven ruins.

*“How surprising,”* as'ahRen said dryly, deciding to give up on the old records keeper in favor of looking around at the rest of the generals. *“And disappointing. We march at damn, and the great council of Ysenden is still bickering about old bones we won't even be seeing.”*

*“You can't know that.”* Useal Tehsts, the general in charge of overseeing the army trainees, was tight-lipped as she responded to this. *“We should not be assuming the draugr will come to us. If we are forced to take the city—”*

*“We won't be,”* the Lord Commander cut the woman off with a sharp look. *“We have said so a hundred times, and I tire of this insubordination.”*

*“According to the magus!”* General Hayle had finally found his voice, seizing on the opportunity to glare at Bonner instead of either of his superiors. *“According to his promises that this ‘Purpose’ of the undead cannot be changed. I still say we have misplaced our faith, if we are trusting in his words!”*

*“A Purpose cannot be changed,”* Bonner snarled in answer. *“It is a self-sustaining weave, just as much as a fireball or a blade of wind might be. To change it, one must extinguish such a spell and replace it with another, and we all here know, hopefully, what happens when a Purpose is removed from its host.”*

A few of the younger generals—who had likely never witnessed the black fire that consumed the draugr in their final death—frowned ever so slightly, but before anyone could say more, Arrackes stepped in once again.

*You begin to test my patience, General Hayle,* the dragon growled, getting the old elf to tense and turn towards his Chancellor nervously. *By constantly questioning Bonner yr’Essel’s word, you constantly question mine. Because I do not share the blood of the er’endehn I grant great leeway to this council—far greater than any in my position have before—but I am your High Chancellor by choice of the people, and my decision on this matter is final. We will follow the battle plan as it has been decided: surround the city, concentrating most heavily on the points of weakness, and let the wights come to us.*

*“The fallen walls and the gates will require the most of our attention,”* as’ahRen agreed, splitting the crowded generals as he moved to approach the table, coming to a stop over it and pointing with a finger at the very map Arrackes had just been surveying. *“Sen’Hev and her scouts were pursued from the north-east entrance of the city, so we can assume to face heavy resistance there, which is why Master Ryndean and his companions will be supporting the High Chancellor and I at that point.”*

In his mind’s eye, Declan followed along with the plan, having seen the maps enough himself to have them practically committed to memory. Erraven was—or had been, rather—a city built as a perfect square, demonstrating the precision of the *er’endehn* in a different way to Ysenden’s breathtaking design. The corners of the great walls that had surrounded the metropolis each pointed along a cardinal direction, originally broken up only by the massive, rising northeast and southwest gates that had looked impressive even in the sketches and more detailed maps Beh’lys Hayle had pulled for them all. There were other cracks in the defenses, now, the proud stonework having split and crumbled in several places after centuries without care, but Declan had to agree that the entrances would be the most likely points of egress, the timber of the gates having rotted away completely, according to the scouts.

*Once the city is encircled wide, we will coordinate our approach together.* Arrackes was continuing his summary, sounding tired of repeating the plan. *The draugr will come to us. We won’t have to set foot within Erraven itself, you have my word.*

No one said anything for a moment, after this, not even the most outspoken of the generals looking like they wanted to disagree when the High Chancellor had just sworn on his honor. After a few seconds, Ester started to look around a little uncomfortably.

When she spoke, it was a simple enough question for Declan to follow on his own.

*“Now it’s just a matter of how they’ll come to us, isn’t it...?”*

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The three ay’ahSels siblings together came to raise Declan and the others the following morning, rousing them an hour or so before the first light of the sun could be made out through the Vyr’esh. Declan started awake when Aliek pulled open the flap of the tent he shared with Ryn and Bonner, having slept fitfully despite the comfortable cot the dark elves had provided. He could have blamed the fact that he had gone to bed fully-dressed—donning everything he would need on the march but his actual armor in case they were attacked in the night—but the reality was it was nerves that had kept him tossing and turning from dusk to the pre-dawn, just as it was nerves that had him wide awake and leaping up at Aliek’s waking word despite the lack of rest. Reaching down for the sword laying atop his folded furs and leathers on the floor—within easy reach of the

bed—Declan had his weapon buckled on and his cuirass thrown over his head as Ryn or Bonner only just started to shake themselves awake.

Before tying the armor into place, though, Declan made sure—for the first of what would be a hundred times that morning—that his firestone still hung from the thong about his neck.

He had seen battle before, technically. Uprisings and rebellions the Iron Wind and the mercenary guilds had sometimes been called on to help quench, often in the parts of Viridian furthest from the al'Dyor's guiding hand. Sometimes, too, bandit camps formed large enough threats that they required a similar deployment to eradicate to the crown's satisfaction—or whatever other influential party had hired the sellswords of Aletha.

Still... The numbers dispatched in those conflicts had only ever numbered in the hundreds at most...

Once he'd finished donning his leathers, Declan excused himself from the tent, stepping outside into the burning glow of the camp. Despite the lack of sun, the whole world beneath the trees glowed a somber orange, flickering here and there as groups of soldiers swept by the braziers as the army came awake. The building bustle had Declan amazed once again, and his worry redouble, taking it all in.

A thousand wights. That's what they were facing...

Compared to the fifteen thousand spread out before him now, it seemed easy to consider the battle one of insignificant odds, but Declan knew better than that. Surrounding the city to make sure none of the undead were missed would spread the army thin, at least initially, and even if that wasn't the case the *best* possible outcome of the day would be that hundreds would die that morning, with no other way around it. Letting Ryn—and Arrackes, for that matter—torch the ruins from above had been an idea broached again in private, but with the internal peace of the dark elves teetering like a lit match on a keg of oil, it hadn't taken much to convince Declan the fallout of such a blatant disregard for the history of Erraven would be greater and far longer lasting than the deaths of the soldiers who would fall that day. It was infuriating, but unsurprising, at least once he'd wrapped his head around the fact that the dark elves—despite all their grand character and skill on the battlefield—played the game of politics just as deftly as the nobles of the Alethan courts.

“Still... You'd think a thousand bloody undead on their doorstep would get them to cool their heads a bit, wouldn't you?” Declan muttered, reaching up absently as he did to touch the firestone hanging over his leather breastplate again.

“Speak up. Declan. It's too early for mumbling.”

At the groggy voice, Declan turned around in time to see Ester climbing out of the smaller tent nearby she had been sharing with Lysiat. The commander herself was standing with her brothers off to one side, talking quietly amongst themselves. They had been tasked by the Lord Commander with supporting Declan and the others that day, and it made him feel a little better knowing the ay'ahSels would be close by. He doubted much of anything would go wrong with Ryn, Bonner, and Arackes in their main group, not to mention as'ahRen and his own growing power.

Still... The lives of his friends and companions weren't the ones Declan was worried about.

“It's not worth saying it out loud,” he told the half-elf once Ester had come to stand beside him, looking her up and down as she surveyed the camp just as he had. She sported the same light leathers that had been gifted to her after the escape from the Mother's Tears, but in addition to her elven sword—a bit thinner and lighter than Declan's—and the gilded black bow and arrows slung across her back and hips respectively, she was also carrying a narrow helm of a familiar design under one arm, its long black plume trailing almost to the ground behind her.

“Where did you get that?” he asked, pointing to the helmet.

“Oh. Lysiat gave its to me.” Ester glanced down at the armor absently before returning to scrutinize the encampment. “I'm sure Aliek or Tesied could find you a spare as well, if you want it.”



“I’ll ask,” Declan agreed with a nod, following her gaze to take in the bustle once more. For a little while they stood like that, side by side, listening to the movement of the elves and Bonner’s grumbled curses at the earliness of the hour from behind them. Eventually, though, Declan got tired of the silence.

“Are you ready for this?” he asked quietly.

Ester gave a low laugh.

“God’s above, no. But who can *really* be ready for this?”

“Fair point.” Declan grimaced. “I was just thinking that even with the odds in our favor, this isn’t going to be painless. If the wights attack the line as spread out as they can, casualties will be minimized, but if they only come out the gates or even one or two more other places, we’re going to be in for a fight until the army can collapse on the skirmishes.”

Ester nodded slowly. “People are going to die,” she said sadly, shoulders sinking a little. “So many people... Truthfully, it’s a little hard to imagine, standing here now...”

“It won’t be real until after.” Declan was reminded then, that this was likely to be Ester’s first *true* battle. “When you’re standing among the fallen. Keep your head, just like you would in the fight itself. There’ll still be lives that can be saved, even after it’s all said and done. Especially with your father around.”

Ester nodded again. After another few seconds of silence, she turned to look at him.

“Don’t do anything stupid, ok?”

Declan snorted. “Me? Never. You must be confusing me with someone else.”

Without looking at her he could tell the woman was glaring at him, but that was the moment Ryn and Bonner decided to make their opportune appearance, ducking out from under the tent with a rustle of canvas.

“Ready, you lot?” Bonner asked as Declan and Ester turned to the pair. He was—as ever—unchanged from his everyday appearance, sporting nothing more than his multicolored robe and leather boots despite the frigid winter air. Even his hood was pulled back, revealing his bald head and braided beard, complete with a tense smile that made it seem like he was doing his best to inject his usually cheer into the morning. At his side, Ryn too was as he always was, black scales and golden eyes matching well with the hilt of the massive obsidian sword slung across his back, gilded in the same colors.

Before Declan or Ester could answer, footsteps at their back told them the ay’ahSels were approaching.

“*Good, you’re all up,*” Lysiat said tersely, face once more the stony mask of *er’endebn*, matching Aliek’s and even Tesied’s for once. “*Come. They’re waiting for us.*”

*Wait.* Ryn was looking around. *Orsik and Eyera. Were are they?*

Declan frowned at this question, turning himself. It wasn’t uncommon for the warg to slink away through the trees in search of their breakfast, but now that he thought about it, it was far earlier than when they usually went hunting, making their absence strange.

It was Ester who offered them the surprising answer.

“They’re already with the Lord Commander,” she answered in common, dipping her head southward. “He asked me if he could borrow them last night?”

“He did?” Declan and Bonner asked together, mutually surprised.

Ester shrugged, and nodded. “Apparently he was curious, so I introduced them and told him they could be bribed with meat.”

“Ooooh I hope that didn’t go poorly,” Bonner muttered, brow creased in concern as he looked to Lysiat and switched into elvish. “*Commander, lead the way. And let’s pray the Lord Commander still has both his hands when we get there...*”

The ay'ahSels glanced at each other in confusion at this, but did as they were told, turning to cut a clean line along the closest of the alleys, Lysiat with her twin swords at the lead, Aliek and Tesied with spears over mirrored shoulders right behind her.

It took them less than a minute to reach the southwest edge of the camp, the head of the march. Their nightly tents had been pitched close to the front line deliberately every evening, which—according to Lysiat—could be considered an honor, an acknowledgment of their ability. Only the most capable officers and their contingents formed the forward camp, trusted as they were to provide the greatest immediate defense in case of attack from the most likely direction of enemy assault.

Personally, Declan couldn't help but suspect there were some among the council hoping the wights would have fallen on them all in their sleep, but he had never voiced it.

Breaking away from the last of the tents, the relative quiet the seven of them stepped into after the surging activity of the battle prep was almost eerie. The units who had the furthest to travel—around to encircle the far side of Erraven—were already lined up and awaiting their marching orders, and in the deepening dark of the failing braziers at their backs the elves seemed more like statues among the trees than any living thing. Indeed, as they pressed through the ranks, Declan touched his firestone again and summoned up a light with a thought, discomfited by the stillness of their surroundings. Had this been an army of men—even the most highly trained of the Vigil—the fidgeting and prayers to the Mother and Her Graces would have born with them a sense of need, of a desire to see the coming day through.

The *er'endebrn*, instead, stood so calmly it was like each of them assumed they were going to die, and had no qualms with that concept.

Once again, Declan couldn't help but shake his head in amazement at the fortitude.

Not half a minute later, and deeper still into the night, they passed through the last of the waiting ranks, reaching the forward line in truth. Declan was relieved, as the gentle glow of his firestone brought a warm relief to the waiting scene, to see that only a portion of the council was gathered here, the rest of them likely already dispatched to their own commands. Arrackes stood tallest in a tight-knit circle of the generals, listening to the scout master Sen'Hev speaking quietly at his left. To his right, as'ahRen stood in rapt attention, arms crossed as he listened.

Declan almost chuckled aloud when he found himself indeed breathing the slightest bit easier once he saw that the Lord Commander was, in fact, in one piece, and that despite the two large, white-and-grey shapes seated patiently on either side of the gathered circle.

"Eyera," Ester called gently as they approached, earning the attention of both wargs. "Eyera, come."

With a light bark of delight the beasts both came bounding over, the female to Ester, Orsik to Declan as he, too, summoned the male to himself. They bumped heads into expectant hands, pushing for rubs, which were dolled out happily while Arrackes, as'ahRen, and the generals all looked around.

*Ab, there you are.* The High Chancellor was the one to speak first, and Declan looked up from Orsik's black eyes to see the old dragon approaching them. *I should thank you for lending them to us. I had my doubts, but I have to admit I felt better having them nearby.*

"You did?" Declan asked, not following.

It was the Lord Commander who answered, stepping between the generals too to nod a greeting to the group.

"You've got a smart pair of animals, there," he said in common, gesturing to the warg. "Master Ryndean told us we couldn't trust a dragon's senses when it came to the wights, so I thought a more conventional means of detection might come in handy."

*Ab, Ryn sounded like he was the first to understand. Between their noses and your ears, the draugr wouldn't be able to get too close without everyone being warned.*

*Precisely, Arrackes said with a nod. Wights can carry a complex Purpose. We know they'll leave the ruins when we approach, but there's no reason they couldn't have left earlier if forewarned of our approach. Even if Syr'esh and Rynus have weeded out the treacherous elements from the city by the time we get back to Ysenden, we can't assume there isn't an agent among us, or in Erraven and capable of spying on us even now.*

“We know something about that, yes,” Declan muttered, recalling the prickling awareness of Sehranya’s eye as he kept petting Orsik between the ears. “Any news, on that front? You were speaking with Sen’Hev when we arrived, it looked like?” He looked pointedly to the general, whose ever-present frown—already likely weighted at being left out of the conversation—only deepened when he looked at her.

“None.” as’ahRen was studying the glowing firestone about Declan’s neck with mild interest as he answered. “Just confirming. There’s been no motion from within the city since she planted her forward scouts yesterday morning. They can’t get too close, obviously, but they’re near enough to make that call.”

“That’s only a good thing,” Bonner said solemnly. “At the very least, even if there’s *more* than the thousand wights waiting for us, they haven’t been reinforced in the last day.”

*We were thinking much the same thing, Arrackes agreed, gesturing with a clawed hand to the soldiers waiting at their backs. And we were just about to deploy the first wave when you arrived. They will have a half-hour start, which should have them in position around the south and west corners of Erraven by the time we reach our own.*

*We’re still taking the northeast gate?* Ryn asked.

“We are,” the Lord Commander confirmed with a nod. “And if it’s all the same to you, Master Ryndean, we would have you all in the front line. We’re expecting the heaviest assault on our position, particularly if the wights notice your and the High Chancellor’s presence. The advantage your group would be able to lend us might be lifesaving.”

Ryn looked around at the others in question, receiving nods from Declan, Bonner, and Ester all at once.

*We will go where you tell us, as’ahRen, Ryn told the old elf, turning back to him. I only wish Arrackes and I could be of greater use, in these circumstances.*

*The Vyr’esh has grown right up to the walls of the city, Arrackes explained, not for the first time. I might be able to maneuver through the trees in my natural form, but you would have trouble, Ryndean.*

*And dragonfire risks setting the whole of the forest ablaze, yes, Ryn finished for the lesser dragon, waving the rest of his reasoning away. I am aware. Then, though, his tone grew more serious. If it’s all the same to you and your council, I would tell you not to let us delay this day’s events on our part any longer. See to your soldiers, High Chancellor.*

Arrackes smiled slightly, then dipped his head in respect.

*Ciriak, call for the march, he said without looking away from his primordial. The rest of you, start gathering your contingents. Second deployment is in thirty minutes.*

As one Sen’Hev and the other remaining generals departed to their duties, slipping by Declan and the others to make through the soldiers towards the camp again. In the end, only the Lord Commander remained by Arrackes, and as he watched Declan saw as’ahRen reach behind his back to pull out a long, black horn, polished to a glimmering sheen in the light of the firestone. Taking a deep breath, the old elf brought it to his lips, then blew out a long, low note that rang more quietly than Declan had expected, rumbling like the low wash of a distant sea.

“Brruuuuurrrrrr!”

To the ears of the *er’endebn*, of course, it was loud enough to hear for miles.

*Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump.*

With alarming precision and the brief shiver of the frozen forest floor beneath them with every step, the first wave began to move, splitting around Declan and the others to march either west or south with the intent to surround the city. The departure was swift even in the dark, and it wasn’t more than three or four minutes

before the thudding of boots—impossible to keep quiet by so many, even for the elves—vanished into the trees.

After that, it was only a matter of waiting.

It wasn't long before the rest of the contingents began to file up in replacement of the recently deployed, the soldiers arriving in scattered groups to form into their units without more than a quiet word from the lesser officers. Declan took advantage to ask the ay'ahSels—in still-broken elvish—after a helmet to compliment his leathers, but aside from that minor interruption they all stood and watched in relative silence as the army gathered. Even when Alick returned from a brief departure to hand Declan a helm, the fit of the thing was too perfect to add much distraction after he'd pulled it on, feeling the black plume slip down his back as he cinched it tight under his chin. Twisting his head this way and that, Declan found his field of vision satisfactory, and he looked down as he pulled the blade at his hip half out of its sheath to study his reflection in the obsidian. Dark blue eyes set over a beard he hadn't trimmed in weeks stared at him through the slots of the black-and-gold armor, and he snorted in amused disbelief before slipping the sword back into place.

*If you'd told me I'd be standing here one day...*, he thought to himself, resuming his studying of the arriving army.

Within twenty minutes the rest of the elves had gathered, leaving the camp beyond the trees absent of all but General Vets and his medical corp, along with a hundred or so sentries to act as lookouts until the battle was through. Another brief wait—and one more quick gathering by Arrackes, as'ahRen, and the remaining generals—and a silent nod was exchanged between the High Chancellor and his Lord Commander.

“Here we go...” Declan heard Ester mutter from beside him, and for a brief instant he felt her hand take his forearm below the elbow, squeezing just tight enough to be felt through the rigid leathers. “Remember: don't do anything stupid.”

Before Declan could respond this time, however, as'ahRen had raised the horn again, and the low, lingering note rang out for a second time.

“*Brruuuuurrrrr!*”

In steady unison, they began to move.

The camp wasn't much more than two miles from the northeast corner of Ysenden, but moving carefully as they were through the dense, icy verdure of the Vyr'esh, it was a slow-going approach. The forest floor dipped and climbed, and icy streams cracked under the weight of a thousand passing soldiers. Without looking back, Declan could imagine the elven army moving like a black tide across the frost-strewn ground, around and about the gargantuan evergreens and along the natural valleys and hills of the land. It would have been an impressive sight to behold, he was sure, but between the still-limited light and his own need to look only forward, Declan left the view to his mind's eye. With every step—with every coordinated *thump* of booted feet at their backs—they drew closer to the fight, drew closer to the claws of the undead he knew would be waiting for them. Fear was absent, now—the draugr no longer horrified him as they once had—but just the same Declan's heart beat more heavily with every passing minute, leaving him to clench his jaw and march in silence beside his friends. Ryn, Bonner, and Ester strode at his sides, with Orsik and Eyera padding along just behind them. Arrackes and as'ahRen led the way, a pair of dark titans made small by the vastness of the woods, and what had been only their fainter shapes in the firestone's glow grew steadily clearer as the rising sun finally made its appearance through the trees behind them. It looked like it was going to be a clear day, boding well for all, and Declan forced himself to take in the forest as they pressed on, forced himself to enjoy the faint rays of red-orange light that managed to creep through the dense branches above. It helped ease the tension, helped ease the rigidity of his shoulders and the tightness with which he held onto the hilt of his sword with his left hand, having taken it up out of habit. Rather than the coming battle he forced himself to imagine what the Vyr'esh would be like as they crossed *back* through it after their victorious assault.

Unfortunately, he had only just managed to calm himself when Arrackes's voice interrupted his focus.

*Halt.*

There came snapped orders in all direction around them, and with exactly two more *thumps* of boots to ground the march went utterly silent again. All of a sudden, Declan could hear the wind through the leaves above them, as well as the distant *crack* of some branch or another breaking under the weight of fallen snow.

Then Arrackes spoke again.

*Form!*

There was a sudden surge of movement at their backs, and Declan turned with the others to watch the elves—originally organized in their marching columns—transition with practiced ease. Within ten seconds the individual contingents were gone, having molded into a single line, five-soldiers deep, that arched out into the lightening woods in what he knew would be a massive, precise circle. Those bearing swords stood at the forefront, after which two lines of spear-wielders had their weapons hefted at an angle upward, ready to drop them over their comrades shoulders. Beyond this group, Declan saw the curved tips of bows, as well as arrows being drawn and knocked, visible through carefully measured body-length of space between each line of five, set in preparation for the constriction of the final approach.

“It seems it might be best if we take our places as well,” Bonner said quietly, his voice still jarring in the silence.

“It would.”

Declan turned in time to see Arrackes and as’ahRen approaching them together. The Lord Commander was donning a pure-black helmet that might have materialized out of nowhere had Declan not caught a glimpse of the small major, Mysat, vanishing back into the lines nearby, and it was he who had spoken.

“The gate is just ahead,” the old elf continued as he finished latching his helm into place. “Two hundred paces through the woods. We will see them soon enough. If you don’t mind my presumption, I would ask Esteria to take the warg to the rear and act as local support. Master Ryndean—” he dipped his head respectfully to the dragon “—if you would stay close to the High Chancellor with me, the three of us will move about freely as needed.”

Ryn looked hesitant, glancing at Declan uncomfortably, but Bonner held up any protest with a grim laugh.

“Declan and I can handle ourselves just fine, you damn lizard. In fact—” he looked to the Lord Commander “—can I assume you want us front and center?”

“If you think that’s wise?” as’ahRen confirmed with a nod. “I have yet to see your abilities for myself, but I heard enough assurances from Colonel Syr’esh’s command back in Ysenden to believe you two aren’t exactly the soft-bodied mages my kind might like to imagine you as. If you could be our bulwark, breaking whatever tide comes at us, it would serve the battle well.” He gestured to Lysiat and her brothers, motioning them forward. “Assuming that’s agreeable, I will have Commander ay’ahSel and the sergeants acting as your personal support. I assure you you will be well defended.”

“No assurances necessary,” Declan said with a strained smile at the siblings, who stopped beside them to stand at the ready. “We know well what they can do.”

“Not to mention Orsik won’t want to come with me,” Ester spoke up from the left, waiting patiently with one hand on Eyera, who had come up to sit beside her. With her other, the woman gestured beyond the lot of them as though to make a point. “He’s more likely to stay with Declan. They’re getting in the habit of finding each other in a fight.”

Turning to follow her motion, Declan almost laughed at the sight of the male who—indeed—was standing almost expectantly not three feet from his back, hackles up and dark eyes lingering on the woods before them, in the direction of Erraven.

“Whatever you think is best,” as’ahRen consented, turning to Declan and Bonner again. “We have a plan, then?”

“We have a plan,” Declan confirmed as the mage nodded solemnly beside him.

“Good. In that case...” The Lord Commander turned to the ay’ahSels, switching to elvish to explain their protective assignment. The siblings snapped up a salute together to show they understood, earning a nod from as’ahRen.

Then the aging elf looked to Arrackes expectantly, and the old dragon didn’t hesitate to give the order.

*Begin the attack, Lord Commander.*

The horn was in as’ahRen’s hand again at once. He paused only for a moment, as though to steel himself, and Declan couldn’t help but feel the slightest bit better upon realizing that even the greatest swordsmen of the *er’endben* was not without his own unease.

Then the instrument was raised, and a third note rumbled through the woods.

“*Brruuuuurrrrr!*”

None moved, waiting with baited breath. Once the sound of the horn had faded, a few seconds passed, lingering into five, then ten.

And then the response came, ringing out in the distance, answering dully from the far side of the city they couldn’t yet see.

“*Brruuuuurrrrr...!*”

*Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump.*

This time, as the army advanced, Declan was careful to step in time with the elves, participating in the diligent tightening of the thirty-thousand-sword noose. Though he and Bonner marched several paces ahead of the spear line, flanked by the ay’ahSels and with Orsik at their backs, to either side it was easy to see the endless circle of soldiers pressing inward, constricting inch by careful inch. Fifty paces into the approach, Declan drew his sword, reaching up as he did to take hold of the firestone in his left hand and pull it up and over his head, freeing its thong from the plume of his new helmet with a tug. Eighty in, and he’d wound the glowing rock tightly into his gloved fist, feeling the magics within pulse as he called on his corpomancy, pressing the spell evenly across his body. At once he felt stronger, faster, and he willed the power to take firm hold into his flesh and bones as they passed a hundred paces. Another twenty, and the relative darkness of the forest before them took on an unnatural texture at last, and Declan realized that what he was seeing was not the shadow and shade of the trees anymore, but the rough hewn surface of worn, black stone.

“Oh my...” Bonner muttered, apparently noticing the same thing, and Declan saw the old mage lift his eyes upward as they continued to near, and with good reason.

Despite the height of the trees around them, despite the fact that Ryn could have stood tall in his true form and not reached half as high as most of the lowest branches of the Vyr’esh, the walls of Erraven seemed to have no end, towering up and beyond the canopy of the evergreens.

Abruptly, Declan truly understood that Ysenden was not the only marvel the *er’endben* had crafted in their time...

Then, though, he saw the gate, and his focus returned with a fervor.

It had been hard to make out at first, the linear cleaving of the stone that formed the city entrance camouflaging well with the rising trunks of the trees. As they crossed A hundred and fifty paces, however, the relief of the great gap within the darker defenses became clear, rising up into the branches just like the rest of the wall. It was fortunate that Declan had seen the sketches and maps, had already been aware of the marvel that was the gate. Otherwise, he might have been further astounded, unable to keep from gaping upward at the never-ending opening that he knew cut the black stone cleanly all the way to the very top, like a titanic blade had sliced the whole of the city in two. Instead, he was able to keep his eyes earthward, able to study the base of the entrance, through which a clear, blue sky was suddenly visible, along with the broken and crumbling ruins of what had once been a great bastion of the elves. After seven hundred years, nothing recognizable remained of the ancient city, not even when they came within thirty paces of the walls. Shattered stone was

strewn across what might once have been a proud, cobbled road, now almost entirely swallowed by tall grass. Further into the city, half-blocking the sight of the far wall in the distance, the crumpled structures were piled high, forming a grim, rolling mound of weather-smoothed rock to stand monument to what once might have been. It should have been sad—and perhaps breathtaking—to witness, but Declan was too preoccupied in that moment worrying about what he *couldn't* see, rather than what he could.

Even as they passed beyond the thicker part of the forest, getting near enough the walls to strike them with a well-thrown rock, there wasn't a single sign of the draugr...

It wasn't wholly unexpected. Sen'Hev had said her scout hadn't drawn the ire of the wights until they'd been within ten paces of the gate, which Declan and Bonner hadn't yet breached. Still, it felt strange, and Declan couldn't help but mutter a silent prayer to the Mother above as his stomach tightened uncomfortably.

"Carefully, now..." Bonner said unnecessarily from his side, slowing down ever so slightly. Declan nodded just the same, checking on the stability of his suffusion briefly before drawing another weave into being on top of it, gathering heat into his clenched left fist.

It was a testament to their time together that, when his hand caught fire with a low *woosh* of flames, the ay'ahSel's on either side of them didn't so much as flinch, while Orsik only growled in preparation at their back.

Thirteen paces. Now twelve. Now eleven... As they at last crossed the ten-pace mark, Declan could see clearly into the shattered city, taking in the ruins in more detail. He could at a glance make out a hundred different places where some nimble enemy might be hiding, ready to pounce, and he was glad for once that they had no intention of actually pressing *into* the walls. Still, though, they continued their approach, not stopping until they were within five paces of the start of the cobbled road poking here and there out of the grass.

As one behind them, the army halted as well, returning the day to its quiet once again.

For fifteen seconds they all waited like that, long enough that Declan eventually stole an uncertain glance backward over his shoulder. Ryn and as'ahRen stood with weapons drawn on either side of an unarmed Arrackes directly behind them, while Ester sat tall atop Eyera behind the archers, arrow knocked to her own bow. All of them were frowning, and theirs were only a few pairs of the hundreds of eyes trained on the empty gateway.

Turning back, Declan whispered sidelong to Lysiat, who stood nearest to him.

*"You bear anything?"*

The elf only shook her head slowly, tilting it as she did as though to listen. For a few seconds more, there was nothing.

Then she stiffened.

*"Something comes,"* she hissed, loud enough for everyone in the vicinity to hear.

There came a shout from behind, and Declan had to force himself not to look back again as he realized it was as'ahRen calling for what he thought was the archers to draw. Sure enough, the next order sounded out, and he recognized the urgent word "spears" even as the line arching out to either side of them seemed to shift downwards when several thousand polearms dropped in a wave. Declan didn't have time to think of how many arrowheads were pointed too close to his and his companions' backs, unfortunately, because in that moment he, too, made out the ugly sound.

Claws scraping against stone.

Holding his breath, he waited.

It was another few long seconds before the first of the wights finally showed itself, white-haired head crawling up out of the ruins to take them all in with empty eyes set in a dark, gaunt face. Its gaze seemed to

sweep across what part of the line it could see from the other side of the gate, breaking slowly into a grin as it did, and it started to pull itself out of the hole it had been hiding in eagerly.

Then, for some reason, the thing met Declan's gaze, and it froze.

He didn't know why, but in that moment the earlier clenching of Declan's gut redoubled, tightening at the sudden stillness in the creature. He was only vaguely aware of the Lord Commander's order to "*Hold! Hold!*"; too focused on trying to figure out where the sudden weight of fear had come from, dropping down on him to hang heavy across his shoulders.

The answer, unfortunately, came as the wight suddenly heaved itself the rest of the way out of the stone, displaying the ragged armor of a fallen soldier of Ysenden. Without pausing it threw back its head, chest expanding as though taking in a heaving breath.

And Declan knew.

"KILL IT!" he shouted, half-turning to look for Ester. "ESTER! KILL IT BEFORE IT—!"

Too late.

"SCREEEEEEEEEEHHHH!"

The shriek the wight let loose in that moment was unlike any Declan had heard before it. It still carried the terrible, manic glee the undead always attacked with, but there was more to it, now, more layered in that sound. It was less a battle cry of any kind, and more—

"A call..." Bonner hissed in horror, realizing it too. "It's calling for something..."

Before Declan could respond, though, Aliek lifted his spear from the mage's other side, pointing with it.

"*There!*" the elf hissed before shifting his weapon slightly. "*And there! And there!*"

Sure enough, even as the terrible scream of the first wight faded into the trees around them, other shapes were stirring, clawing and crawling their way out of the rubble and ruins. As they watched, two, then ten, then fifty undead staggered to their feet, hungry eyes fixed on the elven army while still more of their ilk rose around them.

"The others," Declan snarled, willing the fire in his hand to redouble into a heavy blaze. "It's calling the others."

"Yes, but how many?!" Bonner had to shout as other, plainer screams started to rise up from the draugr.

"All of them!" Declan roared in answer, flinging his spell out in an arc of flames just as the wights began to charge.