

## CHAPTER TWENTY

*SYR'ESH!* Ryn's voice was a roar of urgency. *SECURE OUR PERIMETER! NOW!*

Declan looked around to find that the dragon and Bonner had both hurried to join him and Ester, along with the Colonel and the rest of his higher officers. Syr'esh himself was studying Orsik's lacerated sides, brow furrowed, and he didn't immediately respond to Ryn's demand.

It wasn't until several of his subordinates—the elders of his circle—approached him to speak in low hisses in the elf's ear that he looked suddenly concerned.

*Of course*, Declan thought, watching the Colonel look sharply at the older officers as though requesting silent confirmation. *They would know, too. They would know what this means.*

Just then, however, any further encouragement to act was made meaningless, because there was a shout of shock from the east line of soldiers, alarming in and of itself given the usual austerity of the elves.

Declan knew, however, as he and Ester both shoved themselves to their feet to look to the trees once more, that what he would find would likely draw alarm from even the *er'endebrn*.

A figure had appeared, tall and thin, lurching out from behind the very tree Orsik had only just come around. It paused on seeing the defensive line, standing in familiar, gilded black leathers to take in the formation. It would have been easy from a distance, perhaps, to mistake the thing for one of the very soldiers it was studying now, except that it seemed to have lost its helmet in the fight with the warg, revealing pale, colorless eyes set above a leering grin framed by loose, lank white hair.

That, and the fact that—while the stump of a missing left arm, severed at the shoulder, didn't bleed—the cruel, bony tips protruding from the fingers of its one good hand dripped red into the snow at its feet.

*SPEARS DOWN!* Ryn roared, rushing by Declan and Ester as he moved in preparation of supporting the line. *SPEARS D—!*

Too late.

With a screech that was both joyous and horrible, the wight launched itself forward, heedless of the bristling weaponry set against it. Already gifted with the speed and guile of the dark elf it had been in life, its reinforced agility—supplemented by dark magic—allowed it to slip between the hafts of the spear-wielders as they tried to adjust to meet it. In a blink it was at the line, running itself onto a sword even as it slashed with terrible claws at the throat of the weapon's owner, ripping the soldier's neck open just beneath the lip of her helm. The elf crumpled, falling to her knees with a gurgle as the comrade to her right stuck the wight with another blade, skewering the thing completely despite its armor.

Unsurprisingly, this blow had as little effect as the first, and a moment later the *er'endebrn* was staggering backwards with a scream, clutching at the face of his helmet where the thing seemed to have caught his eyes with a slash of its hand.

*NO!* Ryn was bellowing, struggling to find an opening with which to use the great blade still drawn at his side without risking cutting down the elves themselves as the soldiers collapsed inward on the wight. *ITS HEAD! STRIKE AT ITS—!*

Fortunately for them all, Declan had started moving the moment the creature had first struck the line.

He was behind Ryn in two strides, drawing his sword as he reached upward. Catching hold of the dragon's shoulder, Declan pulled up even as he leapt, willing power into his weave of strength as he did. Two weeks of hard study paid off when he managed to launch himself into the air, arching up some eight or nine feet to clear the line of elves, landing on the other side of it into a roll. He was on his feet in a heartbeat, already turning as he took hold of the leather thong about his neck and ripped it loose, drawing out the firestone from under his breastplate. With a snap of the cord he had the vessel in hand, launching himself at the wight's back. The

creature was fast, though, faster than the similar beasts he'd faced who'd been crafted from the fallen Vigil troops, and with a jerk of its body it wrenched itself away from the elves to whirl on him, pale teeth bared under dead eyes, the two swords that had pierced it still sticking gruesomely out of its chest and side. Ordinarily Declan suspected he would have been dead inside of a second. *This* wight bore the body of an *er'endebln*, bore the speed and skill of the soldier whose flesh it wore. He had yet to go toe to toe with any of the ay'ahSels in the training ring, and they were opponents not even infused with the power of a necromantic master.

On the other hand, with a real blade in the hand of a true enemy intent on killing him launching itself at his throat, Declan was no longer limited by Bonner's instruction of restraint.

There was a low *whoom* of expanding heat as he met the creature fist-first, flames erupting from his knuckles and fingers as his spellwork blasted outward from the firestone clutched in his palm. The weave was muted, Declan not wanting to catch any of the soldiers at the wight's rear in collateral fire, and served little purpose other than to slam the creature backwards again, cutting off its lunging momentum to send it staggering and screeched as the skin of its face bubbled and blistered.

Declan, however, wasn't done.

With a speed and strength only possible under the effects of his corpomancy, he closed the distance between them in a breath, coming into range before the creature had a chance to find its footing again. The thing actually seemed to blink at him in surprise, like he'd caught it unawares, as his new black sword flashed in a screaming arc through the air, catching it cleanly in the side of the head. The heavy blade cleaved through skin and bone with a *crunch*, cutting off the top of the wight's skull in a blow that sprayed blood and gore across the forest floor. The rest of its body collapsed at once, but Declan threw a hand out to stop the elves surging forward to run the corpse through and make sure it was properly dead.

"NO! BACK! GET BACK!"

Though he hadn't had the time to work out how to say as much in elvish, the urgency of his shout alone was enough to make the *er'endebln* take pause, and just in time. With an unearthly, keening wail, black flames erupted from fallen wight's wound, spreading downward to rip and tear at the body until every inch of it—including the chunk of head that had landed several feet away—was being consumed by dark fire. Forcing himself to look away, Declan scanned the trees once more to make sure he wouldn't be ambushed from behind, leaving the elves to watch in horror.

Only when the horrible scream of the broken Purpose faded did Declan turn to the defensive line again.

"*At head!*" he shouted in the best elvish he could muster this time, doing his best to sign the symbol for "sword" then "head" with the firestone still in hand. "*Strike at head!*"

He didn't have time to make sure the point had gotten across when there came another scream, from the south of the circled elves this time, then another from the west.

*Declan, you and Ester support the east!* Ryn called to him from the other side of the line, his towering form already turning towards the rising sound of fighting. *Bonner and I will see to the other flanks!*

Declan was about to shout back his understanding when the wall of soldiers before him tensed, and he whirled, throwing himself back just in time to keep from having his face torn off by a blur of bony claws slashing at his eyes. This second wight had been a female elf, but unlike the first she sported no livery of Ysenden, no black leather or gold plating. On the contrary, she looked to be wearing plain clothes that might once have been colored, like one might expect from a well-born commoner, and her long white hair might have been braided at some point, though it was now ragged and riddled with dirt and snow.

*Not of the army,* was all Declan had time to register, ducking under a second blow as he continued to backpedal towards the support of the elven line. *Not one of the missing soldiers.*

*Thunk.*

As it leapt at him again, an arrow ripped by Declan's right ear to lodge into the wight's neck, knocking it nearly flat. It recovered quickly, though, and grinned even as it launched itself forward again, attempting to screech around the haft buried in its throat. Declan had gathered up a more substantial spell of flames in his right hand, ready to blast the creature into ash if he could manage it, but just as he began to bring his arm up to cast the weave he faltered when two shapes whipped by either side of him, darting out from the line at his back. In a blink two spears had buried themselves across each other in the wight's chest, bringing it to such a sharp stop that its feet partially flew out from under it. At once it started scrabbling at the weapon's hafts, gurgling in anger as it glared with pale eyes, but before it could get a good purchase on the black wood to try and break it, a third figure arrived in a blur from the north, twin blades flashing in arcs of black. The first blow relieved the wight of a raised arm, but the second followed before the creature likely noticed it, biting into its neck just above what had to have been Ester's arrow.

This time the entire head fell to the ground, and the wail came in a ghostly shriek as the spears were wrenched from flesh already erupting into flame.

*"At the head, he said?"* Tesied asked aloud from beside Declan, giving him a grim smile as he and Aliek flicked their blades clean at their sides.

*"At the head!"* Lysiat called out in confirmation over the inferno, stepping around the black fire with both blades still and ready at her sides.

*"Glad you listen,"* Declan answered their taunting roughly, looking around just as the line at their back split to let Ester, Eyera, and Orsik through. The male was still bleeding, but he was no longer limping, and Ester answered Declan's curious look at the warg as they came up beside the group.

"Father did what he could with what time he had!" she said hurriedly, drawing another arrow to nock on her *er'endebrn* bow. "Orsik can move again, but he'll need more attention later! More importantly—" she dipped her head towards the dark stain that was all that remained of the second wight "—that wasn't one of the missing soldiers, Declan! She wasn't wearing armor!"

"I noticed the same thing!" he agreed darkly, looking to the grey-black ash as the sounds of battle started to mount around them.

*"In elvish! In elvish, Declan!"*

With a step Lysiat had moved to stand beside the pair, looking frustrated. As the shrieks of the wights were being joined by the screams of dying elves, Declan supposed he could understand the sentiment.

*"More than gone soldiers!"* he did his best to elucidate as he indicated the stain with his sword. *"That one, not soldier! We fight more than gone soldiers!"*

As though to make his point for him, in the corner of his eye Declan saw a shadowy flash, and he turned just in time to see not one, not two, but *three* squealing figures sprint out of the trees to strike the elven line just to the south of them, not a one among their number in the armor of Ysenden.

They didn't have time to be standing around.

*"AT HEAD!"* Declan bellowed once again, already bolting out of their little group to aim for the trio of wights that were in the process of tearing a hole in the formation. *"STRIKE AT HEAD!"*

And then the world was all blood and flames.

Despite the fact that they seemed to outnumber their enemy for the time being, the younger generation of *er'endebrn*'s inexperience with dealing with the draugr took an immediate toll. Though he, Ester, Eyera, Orsik, and the ay'ahSels darted up and down the eastern flank to support the battle wherever they could, every time they turned around they saw another soldier fall, another of the creatures come flying out of the woods with a scream. For every one of the wights they felled it seemed like they lost at least one of their own, and no number of spells or arrows or blades could stop the deadly rush of the undead that seemed to be coming faster and

faster. Before long the seven of them were forced to split up as a full-fledged wave of six wights came spilling out of the trees, Declan yelling for Ester to support Lysiat and her brothers before shouting for Orsik.

As it turned out, his weeks of magical and physical train, along with the warg's natural size and savagery, proved a devastating combination when backed up by the stoicism and skill of the soldiers of Ysenden.

Slashing out with his left hand, Declan didn't have time to concern himself with the sanctity of the forest as he sprayed the ground before one of the undead with a line of liquid fire, catching it about the legs so that it crumbled to the burning ground. Leaving the crippled creature to the elves—the draugr still viciously clawing at the frozen earth as it attempted draw itself forward—he and Orsik engaged another each, the warg slamming one wight in weather-worn rags to the ground to tear at its face as Declan took on the other with his sword leading the way. Even with his improving corpomancy he was hardly a match for the thing's speed, but he could move well enough now to at least keep from dying as he gathered up another spell. When the wight slashed at him wildly, he just managed to dodge under the blow and come up behind it with some clever footwork. The creature spun in the same breath, and Declan got his blade up in time to sever the claws of one hand that might otherwise have caught him in the face. As the draugr screamed in frustration, though, he punched at it, willing more magic out of the stone this time. With a small explosion of controlled fire the thing was sent catapulting backward, old clothes alight and burning. With a gruesome series of *shlunks* it was impaled on the waiting spears of the *er'endebrn*, ready in support now, and in frightening cohesion the soldiers stepped away from each other even as they brought their polearms inward, bearing the thrashing thing to the ground kicking and screeching.

Declan was already turning away when the black blades of swords flashed, and the screaming was replaced by the wail of the shattered Purpose.

*They do learn quick*, he admitted to himself, running forward to meet another wight as it came sprinting out of the trees.

With Orsik's assistance, Declan soon lost count of the creatures they felled. Seven, perhaps? Or eight? It felt strange, to forget himself as he fought, to give in to his body and his instincts. It had been months since he'd felt such confidence in himself, since he'd felt at least on even footing with his enemy. He had almost lost the feeling, truth be told, almost buried it. For most of his life Declan had almost always been the strongest, almost always been the fastest and the best. For most of his life he had been able to fight calmly, collectedly, without losing himself to fear and disbelief. It had only taken him a few short months to lose touch with that assuredness, he saw now. The ghouls. The wereyn. The wights. The drey and tunneler especially. They had stolen that from him.

But now, as he thrust his blade into the mouth of one undead even as his flames consumed the chest and head of another, Declan realized that he was finding it again.

Another fell to the magics, collapsing into the roiling pools of broiling fire that had steadily grown around Declan as he fought. Orsik had gotten smart to the weaves, too, and didn't hesitate to slam his own opponent sideways into the heat with his massive head. Declan's sword flashed, and a third screamed in fury as it found itself missing an arm, then was silenced as some soldier or another deftly thrust their spear past his shoulder to take it through the eye. All the while Declan stayed calm, stayed focused, his confidence building with every passing second.

With those same ticking moments, though, he knew also that the elves were dying.

It was a slow, methodical butchery, but the slaughter was happening all the same. Three or four minutes into the fight now, and the wights were still coming faster and faster. Like the sounds of battle were drawing the creatures for a mile all around them, their unending press was a constant, crushing force. Declan suspected the only reason Ryn hadn't turned yet was for fear of setting the Vyr'esh ablaze, but if things kept going the way they were, he knew the dragon would be forced to take his true form before too long, forest be damned. With every step back he and Orsik were pushed, with every fallen body of a soldier he had to step over, Declan's suspicion that they were going to be overrun grew. He didn't have time to turn and judge, but if he had to guess

he suspected their total losses would amount to half their number soon enough, the killing happening quicker and quicker as they were pushed closer together.

“Shit...” he muttered under his breath, sweeping another arcing torrent of flame over the ground, forcing a new trio of wights to scatter and split around the magic.

Then, from somewhere behind him, there came a single, ringing shout he recognized.

“*AVRETE!*” Colonel Syr’esh was yelling at the top of his lungs. “*AVRETE NORS! AVRETE!*”

Only the single word for “north” was not lost on Declan, the other not among those he’d learned so far. As the wights came around the edges of his burning magic to collapse in on him, he could only hope he’d be able to follow the lead of the soldiers at his back as he crouched low, blade ready and a powerful weave of force already gathered in his left hand, ready to send at least one or two of creatures staggering back into the fires.

In the end, he needn’t have bothered.

There was a *thrum*, and the wight furthest to his left was slammed sideways, dark flames already growing from the shaft the of the arrow buried in its temple. The other two died equally as quickly, the one at his right as one spear severed a leg above the knee and another cleaved through its neck as it collapsed towards the ground, the left in a single flash of glossy black as Lysiat lanced once again into view, sword slashing through enough of its skull to drop it. Declan was left feeling rather disappointed as he called back his weave, standing straight with the intention of shouting his thanks to the ay’ahSels for their timely arrival over the triple shriek of three destroyed Purposes.

Before he could get a word out, however, the twins were on him, grabbing him by the arms and starting to haul at him, shouting as they did.

“*NORTH!*” they were saying. “*NORTH!*”

Declan, bewildered, only had time to see Lysiat calling for Orsik, the warg bounding to the elf’s side, before his view was blocked by another large, grey-white form.

“Declan!” Ester shouted from atop Eyera, her bow still in hand. “They’ve called the retreat! Run! RUN!”

Declan didn’t have to be told twice.

Pulling himself free of Aliek and Tesied’s grips, he stumbled only briefly before he was sprinting northward right along with the elves, keeping up only by pouring every ounce of focus he could into his corpomancy. Over more bodies than he cared to count did he hurdle as they fled, not daring to look back even after Lysiat caught up to them, riding on Orsik’s back. Ordinarily he might have found the sight of the elf clutching the warg’s fur for handholds rather amusing, but he had no space to feel anything other than the slick *crunch* of the cold ground under his boots as he ran. All around him the soldiers were retreating, sharing the call to make north as they did. Where there had been two hundred not five minutes before, there were now indeed hardly more than half that many, and Declan felt his focus shaken by nausea at the sight of so few thundering along beside them. The shrieks of their pursuers, growing in fervor and volume with every step he took, didn’t help that sickening feeling, and he at last couldn’t stop himself from glancing back.

“*Shit!*” he said again, louder this time, as he saw why the higher officers had called for a withdrawal.

Pouring out of the western and southern woods, at least four-score white-haired figures in various states of dress were hounding them with all speed, mouths almost unnaturally-agape as they screamed with their horrible glee. The east line, he realized suddenly, hadn’t taken a fraction of the attack the rest of the formation must have, and with a sudden drop of his stomach Declan feared abruptly that there was perhaps a different reason Ryn hadn’t shown his true form yet, nor Bonner cast any spells to slow the enemy.

Cursing again, he tried to scan the fleeing backs of the soldiers ahead of him, but distinguishing black and gold from black and gold was difficult at a full sprint. Through the trees and scattered underbrush, he doubted even Ryn’s *rb’eem* would have been obvious to him among the running figures.

Ironically, Bonner's comments about mind-speech sprang to mind, and Declan found himself swearing he would take the mage up on his offer if they made it through this mess.

First things first, though...

"Ester!" Declan shouted as they half-ran, half-slid down a sudden slope in the forest floor, sending snow and dirt spraying everywhere. "Where's Ryn? Where's your father?"

Before the half-elf could start to answer, however, a familiar voice rang through his head.

*Here, Declan! On you left!*

Declan looked west, and indeed found the dragon bounding in their direction through the woods. He had taken to his wolf's form for speed, and despite what appeared to have been some delay in retreating was catching up to them fast, his new sword sheathed in his jaws.

"Ryn!" It was Ester's turn to call out. "Where is Father?!"

*Safe!* the dragon answered them, leaping clear over the better part of fallen tree to land beside Lysiat and Orsik, matching pace with them. *He's gone ahead to prepare the way!*

"The way?" Declan repeated in a shout, vaulting over a small boulder as the thunder of their feet and the continued screeching of the wights nearly drowned out his voice.

Ryn nodded. *The river.*

Apparently even the ay'ahSels had spent enough time around them to have a sense of what that meant, because not a one of them said anything to this.

"Where did they come from?!" Ester demanded instead, ducked low over Eyera as the warg continued to churn the ground beneath them. "The wights?! You couldn't see them?!"

The faint clink of metal had Declan suspecting the dragon was shaking his wide head. *No. I could not, though that's hardly surprising. I doubt I could feel them now even if I tried, and there must be nearly a hundred in that pack.*

"Comforting," Declan grunted.

*As for where they came from, I haven't the faintest clue, Ryn continued. I am not familiar with the Vyr'esh. For all I know they might have been scattered about us the entirety of the last two weeks and simply chose now to attack.*

Declan was doubtful of this theory, however. That the draugr had been hidden from the dragon's sight was indeed no surprise—the Endless Queen had been using the same trick for months now—but Ryn had caught the first presence of a drey in the tunnels after learning to look for what *wasn't* there as much as what was. Doubtless the smaller size of a single wight would have made such a distinction harder to sense, but more than the *hundred* they'd fought and were now fleeing from? It didn't align.

No. It was more likely the drey had been lying in wait for them, had been dispatched for the exact purpose of ambushing them. The way they'd come pouring out of the woods little by little also led Declan to imagine that whoever—or *whatever*—had woven the creature's Purposes into such a task had spread them through the forest in preparation, like they'd only had a general sense of what path the forward unit would be taking back to Ysenden. It was too much of a coincidence, otherwise. What was more, if Declan understood the essentials of necromancy as explained to him, then keeping the wights scattered throughout the Vyr'esh for longer than was necessary was likely ill-advised. Exposing corpses—even magically-preserved corpses—to the winter elements was a good way to lose flesh, to lose limbs and bodies to the cold and wind. Beyond that, while the wights might be able to fend for themselves, Declan knew first-hand that there were beasts among these woods that would be a challenge even to any single or pair of undead, and were likely hungry enough to offer that challenge. Declan grit his teeth as he came to the grim conclusion that Sehranya had indeed very likely beaten them to Eserysh.

In fact, it seemed like she might already have somehow established herself more permanently than any of them would have liked.

Declan's consideration of this cold thought was interrupted by an exclamation of anticipation from Ester. A few seconds later, even he could see the light through trees that had clearly caught her attention, the sign that they were reaching a break in the dense sprawl of the woods.

*East!* Ryn barked at them as they approached the open air. *Half a hundred yards east!*

Wordlessly they followed his command together, shifting course slightly to the right. Most of the fleeing elves around them adjusted in the same fashion upon hearing the dragon's voice, and within twenty seconds or so they were bolting out of the trees and onto a shallow, snowy bank beneath the rare sun that had held throughout the morning's march. Before them, the river—the 'Lyons', Declan recalled—extended in a flat, frozen expanse some forty yards across, the grey-white of the ice beneath the wind-blown snow reflecting the blue of the sky and the light of the day in a mix of azure brilliance that might have been pretty any other time.

For the moment, however, Declan saw nothing more than a means of escape.

*To Bonner!* Ryn shouted, already bounding across the frozen flow, claws offering him good purchase despite the sheer sheen of it. *Cross to Bonner!*

Looking to the far bank, Declan indeed saw that the old man had long-since beaten them to the other side. What was more, he was not standing idle at the edge of the ice, but instead his hands flung out before him, red-orange light building ominously about his fingers and palms as he appeared to mutter with eyes fixed on the river.

Though he might still be in the earliest stages of his magical training, Declan knew the gathering signs of a powerful weave, particularly one as destructive as what Bonner clearly had planned.

"CROSS!" he bellowed after Ryn, immediately setting out to follow the dragon as quickly as he could. "CROSS NOW!"

Ester translated his words with equal fervor behind him, and the few elves who'd been lingering uncertainly at the edges of the Lyons began hurrying after Declan. Moving carefully, he did his best not to slip as he struggled across, trusting the ay'ahSels, too, to follow with Ester and the warg.

He was just over half way to the far side when there rose a scream, piercing in the brilliance of the open air, and he looked over his shoulder in alarm.

Whereas the scattered elves who had been trailing behind him were fighting not to fall as they crossed, the wights had no such reservations. Though many of them slipped and dropped within a few yards of setting off across the ice, the ones that did started crawling across the river with frightening speed using their claws for purchase, and those that did not caught several of the more cautious stragglers within seconds. Declan saw one elf go down as an undead in the same armor as the soldier leapt on his back in a spray of blood, then another as two more caught up to them together, ripping and tearing even as they fell. Declan forced himself to look away, forced himself to focus on Bonner getting closer and closer, noticing as he did that the spell in the mage's hands had bloomed into something of terrifying proportions. The red light had expanded, solidifying and linking into arcs of crimson lighting, and even as he continued to struggle forward Declan saw those flickering lines dip and rise away from each other, growing steadier and stronger with every passing second. By the time he was less than ten yards from the shore, the spell had formed itself into a magic circle that expanded as it swirled, runes of power shaping themselves out of the air in the same red lines.

"Hurry!" Bonner was shouting now, and Declan could have sworn the mage's eyes had started to glow with bloody brilliance through the sheen of the spell. "HURRY!"

A handful of heartbeats later, Declan was off the ice and onto the northern bank, turning and gathering his own weave as Ester and the others clambered into the snow not far behind them.

Taking careful aim, Declan solidified his flames as best he could into his fist. It was his first attempt at casting any focused projectile outside of his controlled training with Bonner, but now was not the time to fear failure. A dozen elves were still scrambling across the river, faces tense and focused even as the screams of their dying comrades shivered over the glimmering ice at their backs. The wights behind them who'd caught no prey

had not stopped, of course, and it was through the broadest gap between the soldiers before him that Declan launched his first spell as Bonner's weave crackled and continued to build beside him. With another *whoosh* of expanding air, a ball of flames erupted from the four fingers he'd raised to help align his aim, rocketing away in a blazing trail. Fearing missing altogether, he'd targeted not the undead themselves, but rather the ice directly before the largest group of three he could safely see. There was a small explosion as the weave struck the frozen river, echoed by squeals of fury as two of the wights were blasted backwards. The third—while not having been caught in the lingering flames of the fireball directly—staggered sideways two steps before black flames bloomed from its head, licking out first from around the heavy sliver of broken ice that had taken it through the jaw.

Encouraged by his success, Declan gathered a second projectile and launched it to similar results, then summoned up a third.

Before he could fire off the fireball, however, Bonner was shouting out from beside him.

“BACK, DECLAN! GET BACK!”

As the size of the magical circle had expanded to some six feet in diameter, Declan only needed to be told once. Reaching out, he took the hand of one soldier who'd very nearly reached the edge of the ice, hauling him onto the shore without ceremony and half dragging him back nearly to the tree line. Once they were at what he hoped was a safe range, Declan watched, open-mouthed, as Bonner waited only for the last of the elves who had survived to step clear of the ice.

Then, with a roar like some violent god of fire and death, the old man set loose his gathered spell.

In a flash of crimson, all sound vanished momentarily from the world. The day seemed to darken, the light of the sun above shifting and dimming until it was as though night had fallen twelve hours early. Then everything brightened again, but no longer in the colors of sunlit morning. Red. Everything was red, illuminated by a brilliant sphere of compressed, crimson energy that boiled and swam between Bonner's hands. Declan had to cover his eyes at the sight of the thing, seeing as he did how the darkness of the shadows cast by the spell cut vertically from his shielding fingers to his face.

And then, with a ringing return of sound, the first bolt of lightning struck.

*CRASH!*

The red arc fell not from the sky, but leapt instead from the roiling sphere of magic in Bonner's hands to cut up then down again, like the magic had been reaching for the heavens only to be pulled earthward by gravity before it could climb too high. It thundered not into any of the still-approaching wights in particular, but bolted down instead into the frozen river, cracking it with a brief flash of fire like a burning boulder dropped on glass. Several massive slabs of ice came loose of the rest, rising and bobbing briefly as smaller shards blasted through the air.

That, though, was only the first bolt.

*CRASH! BOOM! CRASH!*

Again and again and again the red lightning leapt from Bonner's hands to slam down into the thick ice, shattering it section by section in an arc growing outward from where the mage stood. More portions tilted or even flipped outright, dumping and dragging the screaming wights into the dark flow of water waiting under the frozen surface. Within five seconds, a twenty-yard radius of the Lyons was a fractured spider web of broken ice, and in ten the lightning was nearing the far bank of the river and extending for fifty yards to the east and west. When the spell struck the south shore, the mage let out a bellow of concentration, and the weave suddenly stopped extending forward, the arcs dipping only further up and down the river.

Then, at long last, the spell seemed to run its course, because with a final “*BOOM!*” one last bolt of energy tore lose a ten-foot section of the ice upstream from them, and then the red faded to let the light of the day return once more.



Even as the sounds of wind and rushing water reached Declan and the others again, however, not a word was spoken, each and every onlooker too awestruck by the sight before them.

The steady, heavy ice they had all escaped across was no more, the once-solid sheet more open river now than frozen surface. From the west, a distant crushing sound was steadily growing louder as the sections and chunks of ice blasted loose of the larger body began crunching and crashing into each other and the still-solid Lyons downstream of them.

Of the wights that had been pursuing them across the river, not a hint remained.

“Mother’s *bloody* mercy...” Declan finally managed to breath, hardly remembering to blink as he gaped at the utter destruction disguised as a steadily flowing river.

There was a *crunch* of snow at his back, but he didn’t have the will to turn around and see who was approaching him as he continued to stare. After a second or two, Ryn came to stand beside him, still in his wolf’s form, white-gold eyes on the water as well.

*I did say you had the greatest mentor of the age, didn’t I?* the dragon said, actually managing to sound just the littlest bit amused.