

## PRELUDE TO THE SIRIENE CORPUS

Cinder let out a deep breath, a puff of misty air escaping his lips into the cold dusk. He shivered, pulling his cloak tighter as he stood atop the guard tower.

Tonight had been more frigid than his last watch as a biting wind swirled through the trees that surrounded Eglavand. Cinder stepped closer to the small fire at the center of the stone tower, stripping his gloves to let the warmth seep into his hands. His eyes drifted toward the horizon, scanning for any sign of trouble, though he knew there would be none. There never was.

Beyond the endless forest, Cinder listened closely beneath the drone of cicadas, faintly recognizing the roar of the river in the distance. The city was blooming and untouched by danger. No wars, no grand threats. Bandits and marauders rambled through from time to time, but even they were a rare occurrence. Eglavand was predominantly a human city, save for the goblin traders who wormed their way in every so often, eager to lighten pockets. Cinder never understood why the beasts were allowed into their cities at all.

A gust of wind brushed him again, sending a wave of goosebumps across his back. He watched the sun slowly sink below the forest, its last embers vanishing into the canopy.

*Hagan's late.*

Cinder glanced down toward the empty street below. His relief was supposed to have arrived before sunset.

He sighed, sitting down beside the fire and pulling out his worn copy of *Ignar's Dogma*. He had read the manuscripts of all the gods, but Ignar's captivated him in a way the others couldn't.

He read by the brazier, firelight twisting across the page. The words blurred as his thoughts wandered to the power he'd dreamed of since boyhood. Ignar's blessing. That rare magic that sets chosen men above the rest. A single touch from the god's hand would raise him beyond the endless monotony of guard posts and patrol routes.

He moved his hands dangerously close to the brazier, the heat curling against his skin. He imagined the fire bending to him, answering his will, becoming a part of him. But nothing came, only the sharp sting of heat.

His hands trembled over the flames until the pain forced him to stop. He yanked them back, staring at his reddened palms. Ignar remained silent. Distant. Always distant.

How many prayers had Cinder given? How many offerings had he left at the shrine, and for what? His god had chosen others, men less disciplined, less devoted. What was the point of faith if it was met with nothing but silence? The fire popped again, a stray ember tumbling onto the stone. Cinder watched it fade to ash.

An hour passed, and the last traces of daylight had long since vanished. The night sky was now a black canvas dotted with glittering pearls. Cinder stood, rubbing his hands before carefully pulling his gloves back on. He snapped his book shut and slung his pack over his shoulder before making his way to the ladder.

He dropped down from the wall and into the barren streets below. A thin puff of dust rose around him before drifting away in the chill. His stiff legs ached from sitting for so long.

The streets were nearly silent now. Shopfronts stood dark and shuttered, their signs swaying eerily in the breeze. For this hour, the emptiness felt wrong. Even at night, there were usually stragglers or drunks stumbling home.

*Where in the hell is Hagan?*

What did it matter? Cinder's shift was over. He wasn't about to waste another hour covering for that lazy shit.

He rounded the corner and froze.

A woman stood pressed against the wall, engulfed in shadow.

"You there!" Cinder called.

No answer. Her stillness was unnatural.

Cautiously, he stepped closer. Her features slowly revealed themselves in the dim light. Her eyes were bleached of color, fogged like breath on glass. Her chin hung slack as a sliver of saliva stretched down to the ground. She stared at nothing, as if caught in some trance. She must have dosed herself senseless on Halyweed.

Cinder frowned and prodded her shoulder with the scabbard of his sword.

"Damn addicts," he muttered, shaking his head and turning back toward the barracks.

Inside the quarters, most of the day guards were already sprawled across their bunks. The low crackle of a fire filled the room, its glow pooling in the far corner where Erwan sat with a copy of *Sol's Dogma* open in his lap. His long, blonde hair spilled over his shoulders, almost grazing the pages.

"Long shift?" Erwan asked without looking up.

Cinder groaned and dropped into the chair beside him, fingers already tugging at the straps of his mail.

"Hagan never showed. Bastard's probably passed out drunk again."

"So you left your post unattended," Erwan said, finally glancing up with narrowed eyes.

With a grunt, Cinder shrugged off the heavy chain, letting it clatter to the floor in a heap. He brushed stray links away from the thick quilted padding beneath, rolling his shoulders to work out the stiffness. The armor kept a man alive, but after hours on the wall, it left his back throbbing.

"If anyone's getting reprimanded, it'll be Hagan," Cinder griped, kicking off his boots and stretching his sore feet toward the fire's warmth. "Besides, nothing ever happens on that side of the city. I'd like to see some bandits try and hack their way through that gate."

Erwan gave a quiet hum and turned a page. "That's what the unblessed say before they learn what a single sorcerer can do."

The word dug a little deeper than Cinder wanted to admit. In Siriene, less than half the population could even touch magic, and even less would ever fully awaken it. For some, it stirred young. Wild, untamed, and often dangerous to the user. For most, it never stirred at all.

Unless a god's hand found you.

A blessing was the only way to force magic awake in those who had none, or to rein in the chaos for those born with it. It made a man more than human. It made him a conduit for a god's will. To be blessed was to hold a fraction of divinity itself.

Cinder glanced longingly at the hearth. "Ignar will hear me."

Erwan didn't look up from his book. "If the gods haven't heard you by now, Cinder, they likely never will."

Cinder snorted. Erwan was a quiet man, always with his nose in some sanctimonious text, speaking only when there was a doctrine to recite. Once, Cinder might have called that discipline. Now, it just reeked of smug piety. Still, he'd learned to tolerate Erwan's company.

They sat without speaking, the fire popping in the grate and the occasional snore drifting from the bunks.

Cinder rose, hefting his chainmail and letting it fall into the chest at the foot of his cot. He peeled off the padded lining, stripped down to his trousers, and slid beneath the fur blankets. The cold sheets bit into his skin, but fatigue quickly dulled the bite.

His mind wandered, as it always did, to the fire atop the watchtower. Its restless flames whispered of a life beyond Eglavand, a life that men like Erwan would never dream of.

The alarms blared.

Cinder's eyes snapped open.

The metallic scream of the bells reverberated through the barracks, rattling in his teeth. Across the room, Erwan still sat by the fire, face drained of color. For a moment, they locked eyes. The meaning was unmistakable: Eglavand was under attack.

Cinder's blankets tangled around his legs as he lurched upright, fumbling for his armor. Around him, the bunks exploded into motion. Curses yelped from every mouth as the barracks tore into panic. Cinder's hands trembled as he dragged the heavy mail over his shoulders and fumbled for the buckles. Who would dare? Bandits? Elves? Something worse?

The barracks door slammed open as a stout man with a beard like tangled wire staggered inside. His eyes were wild, and his voice shook the rafters.

"We're under attack!" he bellowed, spittle flying from his lips. "They're inside the city! Move, godsdammit, Move!"

The words ripped Cinder from his daze. He staggered with the surge of men toward the door, the roar of panic already spilling in from the streets. The cold air hit him as he burst outside, but it wasn't the chill that froze him.

It was the sound of screams. Dozens, hundreds of them, tearing through the city. And not from the gates or the walls. From everywhere.

The enemy was already here.

Terrified citizens spilled into the streets, shoving toward the central keep in a panicked tide. Some froze where they stood, rooted to the cobbles as if petrified. A boy in armor far too big for him skidded to a halt in front of Cinder, gasping, the whites of his eyes gleaming in the dark. His sword clattered uselessly at his side, barely held upright by his trembling arms.

"Captain! They just started attacking out of nowhere!" the boy blurted, words tumbling over each other.

The captain seized him by the shoulders. "Who? Who is attacking?"

The boy's mouth worked uselessly. "I don't know, sir. The townsfolk..." His voice cracked into a sob. "They're tearing each other apart. It's like they've gone mad."

Cinder's stomach turned. The image of the strange woman he'd seen in the street before seeped into his mind. Not bandits. Not elves. Something else entirely. He caught Erwan's gaze, mirroring the same unspoken dread.

"What are you standing here for?" the captain roared. "Spread out! Find out what the hell is happening!"

Cinder shot a look at Erwan as they broke into a sprint with two other guards. Their mail rattled with every stride, the sound clashing with the shrieks carried through the night. The city itself seemed to pulse with shouts, shattered doors, and mothers' wailing for their children.

A skirmish spilled into view up ahead, lit by the sputtering glow of a lantern. Three night watch soldiers fought desperately, blades flashing against a group of townsfolk. Cinder's stomach lurched into his throat as he recognized the same woman from before.

She lunged with a butcher's knife, her movements broken and unnatural. Her blade slipped past a soldier's guard and sank deep into the chainmail at his ribs. His cry turned guttural as he smashed the pommel of his sword against her temple.

The sound was wet, her skull collapsing inward with a sickening crunch. She dropped instantly, her slack face folding into the stone. Pooling black blood glistened in the lantern light.

Cinder didn't have time to breathe. He and the others fell upon the rest, cutting them down in the span of heartbeats. The bodies shuddered, spasmed, then went limp. The smell of iron flooded the street.

The wounded soldier clutched at Cinder's arm, trembling. "Gratitude," he rasped.

"Don't mention it," Cinder muttered, though his eyes lingered on the woman's corpse. He kicked her body once, as if testing whether she'd rise again.

Erwan's voice cut through the hush. "What's going on?"

The soldier shook his head, gasping between words. "We don't know. We were on patrol, and they came at us like rabid dogs. Could be bandits."

The guard raised a shaking finger, pointing at one of the sprawled bodies. Cinder followed his gaze to where an old man lay crumpled on the ground, his limbs thin and frail.

"But that one's not," the guard whispered. "I've seen him every day for years. He sold bread in the market."

Cinder gasped as suddenly hot pain lanced through the back of his leg. He spun to see the woman with her skull still caved, dragging herself across the ground. Her broken arm clutched the knife that tore into his muscle.

He cried out, kicking her hand aside. His blade came down, splitting her chest open to the sternum. She spasmed beneath him, limbs twitching like a dying insect.

He staggered back, panting, the knife still buried deep in his calf.

*She was dead.*

He'd seen her skull crack, seen her blood pool. Yet still she moved. He clenched his jaw and ripped the blade from his leg, flinging it into the street. His eyes swept over the other corpses and stilled.

One by one, the bodies shivered. Limbs jolted, fingers scraped against the stone, and torsos jerked with grotesque cracks. Bloodied mouths gaped, drawing ragged breaths they no longer needed.

The woman dragged herself upright again, chest split open, head lolling on her broken neck. The others followed, staggering to their feet in unison, wounds gaping but ignored.

Cinder felt the blood in his veins turn cold. Their eyes were all milky, clouded, and fixed straight ahead. Faces once familiar now blank as wax masks.

The city's alarm blared again, swallowed by a deafening roar.

Steel shrieked against steel as if the gates themselves were being ripped apart. The ground trembled under Cinder's boots, and a wave of screams followed before being smothered beneath a tide of inhuman shrieks spilling from the western wall.

"The western gate!" someone shouted. "They've bre—" The voice ended in a disturbing crunch.

"Run," a guard beside him whispered before bolting toward the barracks.

"Go! Go!" Cinder barked. His leg trembled, but he forced them into motion, chasing the others as the risen corpses lurched after them. Their wounds dripped viscous trails of gore, painting the cobblestones black.

"To me!" The captain's voice rallied from just ahead.

The guards surged toward it, desperation driving their steps until one of them stumbled. Mail scraped against the street as the man folded forward, sliding across the stone.

He had time for only one scream.

The horde was on him instantly, knives and jagged nails tearing into his flesh. His cries broke into choking gargles, then silence, as the sound of rending tissue drowned all else.

Cinder glanced just long enough to see Erwan's expression next to him, ashen, lips drawn tight, his eyes filled with the dawning realization that whatever this was, it could not be stopped.

They rounded the corner and nearly collided with the captain, now astride a black charger. His voice boomed, barking orders to a cluster of roughly fifty soldiers who stood braced in a shield wall. Steel glinted in the lantern light, their swords drawn and faces terrified.

"Behind us!" Cinder yelled.

"Formation!" the captain roared.

The soldiers snapped together in practiced precision, shields locking with hollow claps. Cinder, Erwan, and the scattered survivors fell into place, pressing firm into the line.

Cinder's pulse hammered in his skull. "Captain!" he shouted hoarsely. "They... they're *rising from the dead*."

The captain's eyes cracked toward him. Whatever argument he had died before it could form as the street beyond shuddered.

The bodies they had already cut down came first, stumbling forward in jerking strides, wounds still open and leaking. Among them was the other soldier who had fallen only moments before, blood still spurting from the holes in his chest. Beside him staggered townsfolk, familiar faces slackened into blank masks. In their ranks were bandits Cinder knew they had slain in skirmishes past, their corpses dragged from wherever they'd fallen.

And then came the others.

Things half-formed, skin bloated and decayed, flesh sloughing from their bones. Rotten jawbones hung unhinged with strings of sinew. Many were little more than skeletons wrapped in tatters of tissue, their yellow bones peeking through deteriorated joints. The stink of death rolled with them, clinging to the air like a poison. Despite their countless forms, they shared the same murky eyes, clouded and misty with the same hollow madness.

And then he saw *him*.

Among the horde, a broad figure lurched forward, blood streaming down his chest from a slit throat that gaped wide as a second mouth.

"Is that...?" Erwan's voice faltered beside him.

Cinder's gut lurched, a bitter taste filling his mouth. "Hagan."

The horde slammed into the shield wall like a breaking wave. The clang of steel was barely audible beneath the overwhelming frenzy of shrieks.

The impact rattled down Cinder's arm as Hagan's hammer crashed against his shield, denting the iron and sending a piercing pain through his limbs. The force nearly knocked him off his feet.

With a snarl, Cinder thrust around the rim of his shield, his blade biting deep into Hagan's gut. Warm blood spilled across his knuckles.

Hagan lurched forward, heedless of the wound, swinging again with unnatural resilience. The hammer's head screeched across Cinder's shield, ringing like a funeral bell.

Cinder slashed low, the sword carving through tendon and sinew, severing both ankles. Hagan buckled, collapsing to the dirt.

Still, he clawed forward.

With a guttural cry, Cinder drove his blade down through Hagan's throat, pinning him to the cobblestones beneath. The steel punched through flesh and dirt alike, blood bubbling up around the hilt. Cinder yanked it free, spraying filth across his boots as Hagan's head lolled lifelessly into the stampede.

Erwan and the guards struggled against the swarm. The creatures hurled themselves at the shield wall without fear. Their bodies broke, only to rise again.

Cinder felt a surge of pain tear across his arm as a blade slipped past his shield, slicing into the elbow. His hand was slickened with blood, and his grip slipped on the hilt.

He rammed his shield into a snarling corpse, the impact reverberating up his entire arm. The soldier beside him screamed as a blade punched through his guard and split his ribs. His body crumpled, and in that single opening, the dead forced themselves into the gap.

"Hold the line!" the captain roared.

Cinder dodged a sword aimed at his throat, cleaving upward with his own. The corpse's spine grated and splintered until the upper body tore free from the waist. The torso clawed across the ground, dragging itself forward even as the legs spasmed helplessly in the dirt.

All around him, the wall of men buckled, fracturing under the relentless onslaught. There was no pause, no reprieve.

A blade hissed past Cinder's ear, close enough to shear a patch of his hair. He pivoted on instinct, slamming a boot into the creature's knee. The joint crunched like dry wood, folding beneath its weight. In the same breath, his sword swept down, cleaving through its neck.

"We can kill them if you cut off their heads!" Cinder roared.

Erwan swung beside him, hacking through a bandit's throat. The head tore loose with an angular cut, the body plunging to the ground. His face lit up, relief flickering in his eyes.

"It works!" he shouted. "Go for the head!"

The line surged with renewed purpose as more heads rolled, and the bodies fell. A feverish desperation rose among the guards, as though they might have a chance of surviving this.

And then the headless corpse stirred.

Their triumph curdled into dread as the headless frame jerked upright, staggering like puppets yanked by unseen strings. The ragged stumps of their neck pulsed, black blood gushing in copious spurts. Slowly, almost mockingly, they stooped to reclaim their fallen weapons.

“By the gods,” Erwan whispered, the words trembling from his lips as, one by one, more of the headless bodies rose back to their feet.

“No!” Cinder bellowed, rage and terror intertwined.

He slashed wildly, severing another creature at the hip. The legs toppled, but the torso dragged itself forward, scraping hungrily toward Cinder’s feet.

“We can’t kill them!” a guard wailed. He stumbled back as a headless creature swung blindly, blood pouring down its armor like a fountain.

“Do not break! Stay in formation!” the captain roared from atop his horse, his blade sweeping an undead townsman clean in two. Gore sprayed across the ground, but the halves kept dragging themselves forward like butchered vermin.

“Cut them to pieces!” he cried again. “Hack them apart! They can’t attack if they can’t move!”

The command snapped the wavering men back into line. Shields locked once more as they tightened into a circle around the captain.

Erwan pressed up against Cinder’s right side, their shields clacking together, the weight of each blow vibrating into their legs. The undead battered the circle relentlessly, throwing themselves against the shields as if eager to be broken.

“Shields high! Keep someone at your back!” Cinder barked through gritted teeth. His sword whistled through the air, biting into a creature’s spine. The corpse crumbled in two. Cinder snarled and crushed its vertebrae beneath his boot, bile rising in his throat.

*This could work. Maybe.*

But there were too many. Already half their number lay in pieces, some among the very creatures clawing at their line.

Cinder’s arm screamed in protest as he clumsily caught a descending blade. The wound to his elbow numbed his hand, the sword slick with his own blood.

“I’m not dying here!” he spat, severing an arm.

Suddenly, the earth lurched beneath them.

First, a tremor. Then another. The rhythm quickened, each shudder rattling the soldiers and undead alike. Cinder’s eyes pulled upward as a monstrous shape rose above the rooftops.

A highverne, taller than three full-grown men. Its skin peeled away in strips, revealing black ligaments and hollowed bones beneath. Its dense beard was matted and entangled with dried blood, crawling with flies. In its hands, it clutched a club thicker than a man’s torso, studded with three tusks that jutted out like hooked fangs.

The giant let out a roar, a grinding, shrieking sound like steel twisting on itself. Soldiers stumbled back impulsively, the formation already cracking.

The captain cursed as the highverne thundered forward. Its club raked side to side as Eglavand’s soldiers were sent sailing through the air like broken dolls. Cinder grunted as one slammed into him, the impact driving him into a pile of gore.

By the time he staggered to his feet, the line was shattered. The circle was nothing but a scattered, scrambling mass of bodies.

The captain spurred his horse forward and cleaved his sword across the giant’s leg. Its decomposing tissue gaped, black blood oozing through the incision, yet the highverne didn’t falter. It looked down, as if bitten by a fly.

Then the highverne screamed.

It was no roar this time, but a sound so shrill that it seemed to shatter glass. Men dropped their weapons to clutch their ears. Even Cinder staggered, palms pressed to his head, teeth aching from the vibration. The captain’s horse reared in terror, whining as it flung him to the ground.

The highverne’s massive hand closed around him.

The giant’s fingers wrapped nearly around the captain’s whole body, snapping his ribs between its grip. The captain’s eyes bulged, blood bursting from his lips in wet gurgles as his body caved in. The crunch was louder than any cry of pain. With all the care of a child discarding a toy, the highverne tossed him aside. His lifeless body landed in a mangled heap.

The men’s morale broke with him.

“We’re going to die!” one guard wailed, tossing his sword aside.

“Run!” another cried, his voice cracking high like a child’s. “We can’t—” His plea ended in a crack as a spear punched through his throat.

Weapons clattered uselessly to the ground as men bolted in every direction. The dead fell upon them like wolves.

“Hold the line!” Cinder cried. “*Fools!* Form up!” Cinder’s desperation cut through the madness, yet no one turned back.

“Fight! Fight, you cowards! Form around me!” He stood, blade ready, a lone anchor in the tide.

The undead surged after the deserters, tearing down those too slow. Across the chaos, Cinder’s eyes locked on Erwan. His old friend scrambled onto the captain’s riderless horse. His ashen face was streaked with blood from a gash across his eye, the cut making him look half-dead already.

“It’s over,” Erwan yelled. His gaze was fixed on a headless corpse dragging itself forward, its stump leaking black ichor. His voice trembled with a conviction deeper than faith.

“The gods have forsaken us.”

Erwan kicked his heels into the horse. The beast squealed and bolted north, carrying him away from the slaughter.

Cinder’s blood boiled. Betrayal carved deeper than any wound as he hacked through another of the shambling dead. Its arms were little more than mangled sticks of bone, but the victory was hollow as more figures pressed in from every side. His body ached with every motion. His muscles burned, and his wounds wept hot blood down his armor. Every swing felt heavier, his blade dragging like lead through tar.

He was drowning in them. Endless. Ceaseless. The dead would not stay down. They dragged themselves forward as if some unseen puppeteer willed them on. This was not a battle. It was a massacre.

His shield rang as another strike slammed against it, numbing his arm to the shoulder. He thrust back, slashing toward the creature’s throat, but his grip failed him. The hilt slipped from his bloodied palm as his sword spun uselessly across the battlefield and vanished into the swarm. His fingers refused to clamp shut.

There was no way out. He was going to die here.

The ground quaked as the highverne barreled toward him like a drumbeat of death closing in. Cinder’s head lifted just as the shadow fell over him.

The club came down, and the world shattered.

Cinder’s body left the ground entirely, bones snapping like kindling as he was flung through the air. Pain detonated in his side, splintering through his ribs. His vision bled red, the edges of the world blurring into nothing but motion.

He crashed through the side of a building, the timber frame exploding into debris. Serrated wood tore into his skin as he crumbled to a stop in the wreckage.

Cinder dragged himself onto his knees, a wet cough tearing from his chest as blood spilled down his chin. The world still spun around him, upside down, sideways, tilting in nauseating lurches. His right arm trembled uselessly at his side. With his other hand, he clutched a shaft of wood lodged in his hip.

He wrenched it free, and the wound gushed into his chainmail.

The soldiers who had fought beside him moments ago now staggered upright, blank-eyed puppets falling in line with the horde. Their bodies were bent at impossible angles, pierced and torn, limbs dragging behind them. Those too mutilated to stand clawed through the dirt, their nails ripping away.

They had found ways to bring them down. Cut them apart. Break them. But death itself refused to hold.

It was futile. The western gate was gone. The screams of the keep carried across the city. He could hear the wails of mothers, of children, and of whole families being torn apart and remade into monsters. Cinder’s mind flashed to the messenger boy, his wide eyes and stammered words. Even he would join this nightmare. Even he would rise.

Cinder clenched his working hand so forcefully his nails carved crescents into his palms.

“Is this how it ends?”

His thoughts reached for the fire. The memory of the watchtower braziers and their warmth in the cold. Flames that teased a life of more than a nameless guard, more than a man chained to mediocrity. Flames that whispered he could be chosen. Blessed.

But no blessing had ever come.

Rage churned inside him, searing hotter than any wound. His lips curled into a snarl as he spat blood into the dirt.

Ignar had forsaken him.

Despite all his prayers, his oaths, and his quiet devotions, the god of fire had never once answered. Never once listened. Never once did he care.

Cinder tilted his head back and screamed into the night.

“*Ignar!*”

His vision blurred, painting the chaos crimson across his eyes.

“Why? Why have you abandoned me? I’ve prayed to you, begged you, *bled* for you!” His words dissolved into a howl. “Damn you! Answer me!”

The city collapsed around him, comrades torn apart and rising again, the Highverne ripping homes open to drag out screaming families. The stench curdled his stomach.

Cinder laughed, a bitter, cracked sound that shook with fury.

“Some god you are. God of chaos? God of destruction?” He flung spit into the ground again. “Yet you hide like a coward.”

His chest heaved as every breath became a snarl. “If this is what faith earns me, then *fuck* you, Ignar.”

His voice broke into a venomous laugh.

“False god!” Cinder roared. “I piss on your flames. I spit on your name. May you choke on every prayer I ever wasted on you. Do you hear me? You are nothing to me! Nothing!”

Suddenly, the air around him crackled with unnatural heat.

The air grew heavy and oppressive, as if the whole world had stopped breathing. Blood that pooled on the stones began to simmer, frothing and spitting like boiling water. As steam rose from the ground, it curdled into a violent spiral above him.

Cinder staggered, clutching his chest as the very air scorched his lungs. Then came a sound, a presence that burned into his mind.

**“You dare curse me?”**

It was an inferno, each syllable igniting like molten stone. Cinder’s vision shuddered, his bones vibrating with the weight. He fell to his hands and knees, his body refusing to rise under the force that wrapped around him like chains.

**“Blasphemy.”** The words crawled through Cinder’s skull. Smoke bled from his nose and mouth.

**“You rage against me, mortal... and I am pleased.”**

Cinder’s gut lurched. This was no hallucination. No fever dream. The god he had cursed was here, *suffocating* him.

Cinder convulsed as heat ripped through every nerve in his body. He collapsed to the ground, writhing, flames bursting from his palms and crawling across his arms like serpents.

Yet, the fire did not consume him. It clung to him as if it belonged there.

**“I name you Paragon. My champion. My weapon. Burn them. Burn them all.”**

Cinder’s body arched, every vein stinging like hot iron. His vision of the city was drowned in blinding light.

**“Do not disappoint me.”**

The highverne’s massive, clouded eyes fixed on Cinder. They were empty, dead, but drawn to the whirling fire twisting around his arms.

With a roar that made the buildings tremble, the giant charged.

From the ground, Cinder gripped the fire around him until it screamed against his skin. He hurled it forward in a torrent that hit the beast square in the chest.

For the first time since the slaughter began, the creature howled, a cry of pain ripped from an ancient abyss. The sound rattled the broken shards strewn across the streets.

Flames crawled greedily across the giant’s rotting skin. There was an unbearable stench of scorched hair and flesh as it bubbled into black smoke. The highverne thrashed, clawing at its own body as if trying to rip the fire away.

It crashed to the ground, dragging itself across the street on blackened arms until the blaze smothered it into a convulsing husk.

At last, it stilled, embers sputtering from its ribs like a final breath.

Cinder stumbled to his feet and stood over it, chest heaving, his arms still alive with flames that pulsed in rhythm with his heartbeat.

Around him, the battlefield shifted as the undead horde turned as one, their clouded eyes locking on his burning silhouette.

They rushed him all at once. A tidal wave of death.

Cinder didn’t hesitate. He screamed, fueled by rage, defiance, and madness. Fire erupted outward, engulfing the first ranks. Skin blistered and charred. Bone snapped and sizzled like dry leaves. As they surged forward, each step carried them into a wall of flame that consumed them.

The fire leapt to the houses, racing up their timber frames and setting the city ablaze. Roofs collapsed under the heat, and smoke poured into the sky as Cinder merged with the magic. Pools of blood boiled on the streets, bubbling like oil. The air rippled with shimmering heat.

The undead wailed as the flames chewed through them, fueled by Ignar’s will.

*Burn them all.*

Cinder’s veins felt molten, his skin prickling as cracks crawled up his arms. He wasn’t sure anymore if he was wielding the fire, or if it was wielding him.

Suddenly, the magic flickered out of his hands, as if torn away. Cinder collapsed to one knee, his stomach lurching violently. A stream of molten bile spewed from his mouth, burning his lips and scalding his tongue. The stench of charred meat filled his nostrils as if his organs were cooking from the inside. He clawed at the ground, gagging and gasping for air. But every inhale seared his lungs. His vision swam, edges darkening into a haze.

Steam hissed from the gashes along his body, his blood simmering where it seeped through broken skin. It frothed from his wounds and spat like grease. His sweat turned to vapor, rising from his frame in blistering wisps. The ground

beneath him sizzled where hot blood pattered against the stone. He could smell his own body betraying him, roasting alive.

The wall of fire around him raged still, but it was no longer his shield. It had become a cage.

The magic drained his strength, burrowing into his organs and clawing toward his heart. Cinder dropped fully to his hands and knees, his body convulsing. His teeth ground together, and sparks charged between his molars as if trying to ignite his breath.

A flurry of footsteps cut through the agony.

“Cinder!”

Cinder couldn’t react. The world faded in and out, warping into dreamlike shapes, the screams of the dead muffling to a distant hum. His vision swam as if he were sinking beneath dark water.

Erwan was suddenly there, sliding from the captain’s horse. He crouched, grabbing hold of Cinder and hauling him upright, slinging a limp arm across his shoulders. His grip was firm but trembling.

“Stay with me! Do you hear me? *Stay with me!*”

Cinder’s head lolled against him, too heavy to lift. He barely managed to drag his eyes upward. Through the curtain of fire, mounted soldiers burst back into the fray, blades flashing as they drove the undead into the inferno left in Cinder’s wake. The creatures collapsed against the magic, shrieking as their flesh exuviated.

There were still too many. The fire couldn’t save them all. The city was already lost.

“Cinder... your eyes...” Erwan said, his face paling as he gawked at him.

Before he could finish, the flames split as one of the creatures hurled itself through. Its skin was shedding in sheets, but its weapon managed to plunge into a soldier’s chest. The man screamed once before the abomination dragged him back into the fire.

“We have to go!” Erwan snapped.

He heaved Cinder upward, forcing him across the captain’s horse. Cinder barely registered the movement, his body little more than a shell burning from within. Erwan vaulted up in front of him, blood dripping from the gash above his eye.

“Move!” Erwan barked at the others.

The remaining riders spurred forward through the streets. Behind them, the flames spread unchecked, consuming houses whole and painting the night red. The undead cried in pursuit, but the fire hemmed them in. The burning tide had brought them only the slightest chance of escape.

The western gate was a ruin of twisted iron and shattered stone, warped as if the highverne had ripped it apart with its bare hands. The riders pushed through the wreckage at a breakneck pace. Cinder swayed limply in the saddle, his body threatening to give out at every jolt.

Even through the rush of blood in his ears, he still heard the distant screams echoing from within the city.

“Cut north!” Erwan barked. “To Avarnis!”

The words barely registered. Cinder only felt the rhythm of the gallop, a steady pounding beneath him that blurred into nothingness. His gaze dragged back toward the city. The flames had turned Eglavand into a massive pyre.

And then he saw it.

A lone figure sat astride a massive warhorse on a hill beyond the gate. It was cloaked in black, face hidden beneath a hood. The rider was utterly still, its presence oppressive even at this distance. It watched them flee with an eerie patience. Cinder couldn’t see its features, but he felt the cold regard settle on him. Recognition snaked through him, though he couldn’t name why.

Then the trees swallowed them, and the figure was gone.

Erwan glanced back, gripping Cinder’s shoulder hard. “Cinder. What *happened?*”

Cinder’s lips cracked into a grin, though it was hollow and lifeless. His breath rattled, smoke escaping his lips with each word.

“Ignar...” he rasped, a ragged laugh tearing free. “Paragon...”

Erwan stared ahead. To Cinder’s surprise, laughter broke from Erwan’s throat. The remaining soldiers said nothing, but their glances flicked back at Cinder, eyes wide with something caught between awe and fear.

They had survived, though only barely. For now, it was enough.

“What were those things?” Cinder forced the words.

“I don’t know,” Erwan said grimly, not looking back.

“You came,” Cinder muttered. “We have to... I can still...”

“No,” Erwan cut him off. “It’s over. I’m taking you to a healer. We’re going to need you alive.”

The fight finally bled out of him. Cinder’s eyelids grew heavy, the heat inside him smoldering like dying coal. With one last desperate breath, he let the exhaustion claim him.

But even as it dragged him under, Ignar’s voice whispered through his mind.

**“You are mine now.”**