

## The Breach: Rescue Preparations

Scratching hisses of steel on stone filled the courtyard between the Third Ring's gates. It had been three hours since sunrise, but none of the recruits had returned from the Initiation to pound against the Breach's gate. Commander Gregor'd already ordered an expedition to leave at noon and recover the lost gear, the recent arrivals already considered dead.

Henrinn, as the newest member of the scouts, had gotten stuck with running all over the Breach to get equipment and provisions. He'd been hoping for at least one returner - it'd been six months since his own Initiation, and Henrinn didn't look forward to another trip in the Dark Woods. A Harpie's Flight native, he'd been comfortable in the wilderness of Einvorn around the isolated village, even up to those surrounding the Watcher's Towers leading towards the Breach. But these forest beyond the walls did nothing but terrify him. He still woke in cold sweats remembering his own night spent on the Initiation. He'd been the only survivor, managing to hide from the were-walkers under an old friend's corpse. He doubt he'd ever had come back if the scouts hadn't found him in the morning. Henrinn didn't want to return the favor today.

Running into the yard, he found the scout leader, Tiarnan. Her red hair and half-a-head height over most of the Breachmen made her easy to find in the milling crowd. Henrinn imagined she'd come up from a penal tith of soldiers - few of those southern flame-heads from The Axe found religious pilgrimages useful.

"Took ya long 'nough, greenie," she called, gesturing Henrinn over.

"I've got the foodstuffs," he responded, dropping his heavy pack of potatoes, jerky, and carrots at her feet. He'd learned not to complain about the namecalling or running through all

three wings back to the farms his first week in her squad. Besides, he didn't want to get stuck lugging the company's rations through the whole search for mouthing back.

"Right then. Here's your blade," she thrust his scabbard and blade against his chest. "Now, get to the ramparts and tell the guardsman we're heading out in thirty minutes. No sense burning light," she finished, turning away dismissively.

Henrinn sighed as he strapped his sword to his waist. The leather armor provided some padding, but he still hadn't got used to the metal smacking against his leg. Brushing off the sweat, the rookie turned to climb the steps of the wall.

After ascending the creaking staircase, Henrinn went to the front gate's guardhouse. Leon and Finn had volunteered for guard duty again, which he could hear them complaining about even thirty yards out. Henrinn entered, but before he could announce himself, Finn's head shot up with an accusatory "What d'ya want?"

"Tiarnan sent. She plans to head out 'fore the hour's up."

"Well, she should hold 'er blade steady then," Leon groaned. "We open it now, and if anyone happens to walk in Gregor'll say we made it to easy. And I'm more 'fraid 'a him than your band of scramblin' rats. Gate opens when the lantern says. No sooner," he turned back to the card game between the disgruntled guardsmen as Finn looked out towards the woods, paying the basest service to his supposed duty.

Before Henrinn could respond, Finn shot towards the window. "Speak'f the devil. Leon! Pass the looking glass! There's something out there!"

Looking for the tool, Leon quickly stood out of the seat, knocking it back and bumping the makeshift table of a barrel. A few cards fell to the floor as he searched for the spyglass. "By the Five, where the hell is it?"

"Scout!" Finn yelled at Henrinn, pulling him over with an outstretched arm. "Make yourself useful. What'd you see out there?"

Henrinn stumbled as he got dragged by his shoulder, but caught himself on the opening and peered out. "Looks like a...man?" he suggested, pointing towards the small shadow moving out from the shadows and into the cleared woods. "It's walking like one."

"I'll be damned. Might not need a recovery after all!" Finn laughed. "Took the boy long enough!"

"How'd you know it's a person?" Henrinn asked, still unsure of his eyes.

"No monsters attack after Initiation. Too fat, too tired, too scared, who knows? But they're always quiet for at least a week or so. That's why Leon and I volunteered!"

"S'truth. Though ya did say the same 'bout the Arrival feast," Leon added, still looking for the spyglass. Finn muttered a reply about even the best swords breaking before he left to tell the courtyard the findings. A few minutes later Leon triumphantly lifted his prize from behind a barrel of oil.

Unsure of what to do, Henrinn stayed. Tiarnan wouldn't need him for the moment, and he'd hear her call if she did. His thoughts were interrupted when Leon shoved the spyglass into Henrinn's hands. The recruit really wished people would stop that.

Before he could stammer out a question, Leon pointed him back towards the window. "My eyes aren't too great after four pints of ale. Just make sure that's a human coming this way, yeah? You know what the beasts look like..." he trailed off, before attempting to clean up the guardhouse.

Looking through the tool, Henrinn clearly saw a man walking towards the Breach. Slowly, and stumbling, but coming this way. "There's a symbol of the Breach on his chest." Henrinn noted the brown gates painted on the man's armor. He expected a call for help, before remembering that if his Initiation echoed Henrinn's, the ability to scream had been lost hours ago. "He looks wounded, about ten minutes out. Should we hel-"

"No!" Finn interrupted, returning to the guardhouse. "If he can't come back by himself, he's not Breach material! Hopefully he 'members where the pits are...eh, I'm sure it's fine."

Henrinn sighed. He'd been promised an honorable, dignified service in exchange for atonement. Not drunken guards and demons.

As the figure drew closer, the courtyard emptied of support units and equipment, with only a few remnants of the gathered forces staying. After the returner told his story, a more informed lance would form to recover resources, and answer the Tower's expedition lantern. Leon had used the guardhouse light to signal for a corruption checker, and the Doctor, with his armored, hulking keepers arrived shortly after, the leather-bound slabs of muscle managing to

be even taller than Tiarnan. The earlier energy of march preparations long faded into the waiting game.

As the returning recruit approached the gates the massive door ground open, the gears clunking on each spoke as the Breach complained. The large masses of wood parted just enough for the man to stumble inside. The moment he crossed the threshold, they slammed shut with an echoing thud. Unable to see over Finn and Leon, Henrinn moved out of the guardhouse to look into the courtyard.

The recruit's pale face, bleeding from a crack on the top, rotated slowly over the crowd. His armor, initially a brown leather, looked black, the stains on the white undershirt showing it came from blood, not the morning's rain. His scabbard dangled on his waist, half torn and empty. One foot lacked a boot. No one moved.

The Doctor looked to either side, and then stepped forward, his motion echoed by his guards. "I'm going to check that you're well, and then we can all rest," he said as he pulled on leather gloves. "It'll be quick," he finished, before placing a beaked mask over his mouth. One of the keepers stepped forward and then rotated, a pack of reflective tools on his shoulder folding open with a series of jangles over the length of his back. The doctor gingerly picked one, a large scalpel, and strode forward. "First, a shallow cut on your arm. Make sure the blood's the right color. It'll be quick." His disconcerting gleeful tone still crawled through the mask's holes.

The man in question stayed still. Henrinn wished he could see his face - the scout knew from experience these tests weren't enjoyable. He saw some motion at the recruit's chin, and assumed it to be a raspy question.

The doctor kept slowly approaching, his keepers flanking on either side. Couldn't be too careful - his predecessor had been killed by a skinchanger - the nasty bastards took on the form of something for a few hours before turning back to the original mollusk-type form. Those sludgeballs would devour a barracks if they got inside. Gregor's scarred face apparently came from managing to fight one off with a blazing lantern. If a changer tried to shift quickly, the jaws popping out of the chest usually gave away the disguise. A keeper feigned a lunge, which Henrinn had been told always got a reaction from those beasts. But still, the recruit had yet to even flinch. The keeper relaxed, and then strode forward, grabbing the recruit's sleeved arm, before holding it out for the approaching Doctor.

A loud crash from the guardhouse broke the silence. Henrinn assumed a flagon had been knocked over by Leon moving back to watch the woods. But he couldn't look over to check.

He was busy staring at the recruit's face.

The boy's body still faced the recoiling Doctor. But the face, now looking like a misplaced mask, had crawled across the skull to look back at the guardhouse. The eyes and jaw evidently stayed in the front, as Henrinn could see the muscle through the gaping, stretched cavities where eyes belonged. The face had a painfully vacant expression, but contorted and askew. Then the lips pulled up in an eldritch smile. Henrinn wasn't sure when he started shouting out the change, but he heard the Doctor and courtyard join in. Noises to his side indicated Finn and Leon reacting, but Henrinn couldn't break his gaze.

The arm rippled, and the surprised keeper instinctively released the rolling flesh, stepping back. Then the twisted scalp rose up from the center, elongating the already contorted

expression, before tearing in half about an inch above the creature's head. The tear went down the middle, the mobile skin peeling away from the muscles below. The recruit had regained the ability to yell, his jaw held only by the scarlet sinew.

The skin kept its course, movements and tears visible in the holes in the armor. But when it tried to separate, it got stuck on the clothing. Instead of stopping, it started lurching out through the collar, reaching into the air like tapeworms leaving a corpse, before falling away in waves. The closest keeper attempted to charge the monster, but a gory coil grabbed his neck before spreading over his face. With a sharp crack and a twist, the giant body fell, his head at an unnatural angle. Through some strange fortune, Henrinn finally managed to look away, his heaving stomach rebelling against his eyes as he spewed onto the floor. He heard a loud chunk of a loading mechanism to his right, and glanced to see Leon shoving a readied crossbow into a nearby brazier. The guard then turned back to aim, bolt ablaze in the metal groove. With the sharp thunk of a trigger pull, it sliced through the air, impacting the thing below right at the collar. The flames licked at its head, but the skin had already left. It started falling in chunks from the arms and legs. Finn's own shot connected with its knee.

"Fuck! It's like it's got three bodies! No more ale on duty." Finn complained, already loading again.

"That's not the drink, I'm seeing it too! Aim at the worm-things!" Leon called back, letting loose another bolt.

The action from the guardhouse veterans stirred the rest. The doctor, already backing away, turned to run. But one of the longer strips of flesh stretched forward to grab his ankle, tripping the man before he could get away. It stayed attached, the collided mass pulsing as a

bubbling motion traveled up the Doctor's leg, his body getting pulled quickly back to the now skinless corpse. The remaining keeper ran forward, grabbing a blade from the tool pack and tried to slice the tendril. But another strand of flesh grabbed his arm before pulling him away from the Doctor.

Before the Doctor could cry for help, Tiarnan and some of the other scouts had managed to find the oil pots in the supplies. With a yawp, she threw the ceramic at the creature and the Doctor, followed by the others. The containers shattered, splashing their contents across both of the bodies. A few of the chunks of flesh started to slink from the center body. The remaining keeper managed to rip off the tendril still holding him, before looking back at the beast and Doctor. Before he could rescue his charge, another soldier threw a jar of quickfire, which instantly erupted into a roaring flame, fueled by the oil and flesh, which engulfed everything. The skin fragments writhed for a moment, before quickly curled up like dying bugs. The crackling fire drowned out the Doctor's screams, but his keeper crashed through the fire, dragging the Doctor away from the central fire. A bucket of water from one of the fire-keepers with the scouts extinguished the flames, but the Doctor had stopped moving. The keeper picked up the body before running back towards the Breach's center - the Apprentice might still help.

After a minute, the motion stopped, replaced by the sound of crackling bones and burnt flesh. Henrinn pushed himself back from the wall, still in shock.

"What the *FUCK* was that?" Finn demanded.

"Skinchanger?" Leon suggested.



“Well, the core of a skinchanger is their *skin stays fucking attached!* They just collapse into a *single* blob! That reached out! It grabbed Doc!”

“I mean, it didn’t like fire.”

“No shit, none of the demons do! Explorer help us, we’ll need more tests. And writing the briefing...” Henrinn stopped listening to Leon and Finn’s complaints. He kept furiously blinking, trying to get the recruit’s face out of his mind. Catching a breath, he stood on shaking legs. Looking up, he saw clouds starting to form over the sun. The rain would help wash away the mess and take care of the remaining fire.

Henrinn turned to look into the forest, desperate to see anything besides the burning flesh in the courtyard. He quickly wished he hadn’t. Near the edges of the clearing, a mass of shadows moved in silent waves. One distinctly stood above the rest - while the shadow crawled slowly, it stalked forward like a human.

“By the Five...” he muttered, unable to finish the warning.

Then, the walker’s top flung back and a deep howl rose above the silence, before it got echoed, by the rest, the predatory call shaking Henrinn’s bones. With a start, the mass raced forward across the open ground, free of the forest’s obstacles.

“Walkers! Wolf-Walkers in the clearing!” Henrinn called, stumbling backwards and slipping on the drippings of his vomit. Looking to the side as he scrambled back to his feet, he saw Finn turn and pull the alarm wire. A few crashes rang out - looking back over the wall, Henrinn saw chunks of the beasts disappearing. The spike pits they’d dug for the last month

working as yelps and pained cries joined the snarling mass of sounds. But the core had already gotten halfway towards the wall, and some had even stood to evade the traps.

Looking down, Henrinn saw a set of sharp, blue eyes pierce the shadow at the Breach's base. Already, the fastest had reached the fort. It stood to its full height, looking like a mix of a man and a hound balancing on its rear. Matted fur showcased its skeletal outline, of sharp angles and stretched flesh. It dropped its front legs by its side. With a sickening pop, they continued to swing entirely around the creature's shoulder, landing against the wall with its elbows pointed towards the wall's top. And it started to climb, the sound of claws searching for a purchase getting louder.

Catching a glimpse of motion, Henrinn looked to the side to see Leon releasing the logs mounted to the fort on a group of the beasts. A series of surprised snarls, followed by a booming thud and bones snapping like twigs told Leon he'd hit.

Scrambling from the wall, Henrinn ran to the steps. A terrible archer, he'd be useless on the barricade. He needed to find Tiarnan, she'd know what to do, have the scouts whipped into sha-

Just a few steps from the staircase's trap door, the air left Henrinn's lungs as a mass slammed into him, lifting him off the wall. Blackness covered his vision, a confused bark sounding next to his ear as he tumbled. He didn't know how many times he twisted, but the ground wouldn't wait for him to finish counting. The beast wrapped around him took the brunt of the blow, its side slamming into the ground. The blow reverberated into Henrinn's spine, the impact throwing him off the monster and a dozen feet away, where he landed on his right shoulder.

Rolling over, the scout groaned. But the wolf-walker wouldn't wait. He saw it right itself, limping on the left side. With a snarl, the beast turned to face Henrinn, its unnatural bent legs lowering it deeper to the ground like a crouching spider. The sharp elbows turned towards the scout represented just as much of a danger as the claws supporting it. Henrinn attempted to stand up, but his shoulder popped, dropping him back. Out of options, his left hand fumbled for his blade, still sheathed on his belt. The beast propelled forward in a leap, clearing the distance in one predatory motion.

Henrinn pulled his hand towards his chest, freeing the blade from its hold. Ducking down, he thrust his arm in a forward arc, he caught the beast's snapping jaw inches above his head's new location, before redirecting it to his left side. The stuck blade forced him to follow, but a stretched leg stopped the fall, his two knees pinning the beast by its stomach and placing Henrinn in control atop the creature's chest. With a wrenching motion, he pulled the blade free of the monster's maw, before quickly stabbing downward into its skull.

Using the sword as a brace, Henrinn lifted himself to his feet, before taking his weapon back with a sickening squelch, gore and brain matter clinging to the steel. The smell of copper mixed with the distinctive rot of the woods beyond filled his nose, finally flushing out the vomit, but it wasn't much better. He'd managed to take on a runt, a walker just a tad under six feet long and without the muscle of the adults kin. The scout turned back to the gate, seeing the battle in full force.

Leon and Finn had been forced from the guardhouse, but not after igniting the oil troughs on the ramparts. The flames lapped at the beasts, forcing most off the wall. Arrows flew overhead from the higher second ring to aid the melee growing in the Third Gate's clearing. The

archers were taking off some of the vanguard, like Henrinn's beast, and only a few Breachmen losses had mounted. But the Dark Forest had yet to finish its onslaught.

Unable to make progress on the ramparts, the were-walkers had turned to the gate. It reverberated from the constant onslaught of impacts, flexing inward more each time. The cracking of splintering wood grew louder than the rest of the scrum. Unconsciously, the scout stepped back, still staring at the wall, sure that if he looked away it would all disappear. His blade hung low in a defensive position out of reflex - any one of these beasts already past the wall could easily escape from a fight and be upon him in an instant.

Before he could fully realize his doomed position, Henrinn again got shoved to the side. But this time, the displacement came with a cheer. Many of the Breachmen who'd been equipped for the expedition had returned, with full armor, spears, and shields. Reinforcements had arrived.

Henrinn spotted Tiarnan, shouting orders from atop a pile of crates. The new vanguard organized, a spiked semicircle forming around the gates. The dented, worn armor and profanity-fueled commands didn't quite match the priest's promise of gilded plate and rousing speeches, but Henrinn had never been more thankful. Meanwhile, the ramparts had finally been cleared of beasts, and archers took their positions, careful not to stand at the still-flaming edge as they rained arrows down towards the gate. A hush fell in the courtyard, broke intermittently by the crackling of the flame wall and thunderous crashing against the gate.

The doors smashed open in an instant, the monsters flowing over each other like water to reach their prizes first. The hail of arrows caught some, but the horde seemed never ending, a new snapping jaw eager to replace any shut ones. The vanguard already got pushed back,

and then splintered apart by the sheer weight of the bodies vying for space. Scouts chucked oil and quickfire, but nothing could stop the flood.

Henrinn stood in shock, braver soldiers running past to join the growing melee. Familiar faces faded into the chaos, no one recognizable over the blood and screaming. There were no shining heroes, pristine faces framed by halos pointed to the skies. No angel leading a last, desperate charge. Just red gore and rusted steel.

Looking behind him, Henrinn saw he stood alone. The rear gates already sealed and barricaded in preparation for the courtyard to fall. Nowhere left to run but forward. Pushing his shoulder out of his mind, Henrinn charged like those before him, unwilling to let the beast take him at their leisure.

He didn't enter the fight with a grandiose beheading or duel. Instead, the training motions drilled since his Initiation came to him like instinct. A roll under a standing beast's legs, slicing at its ankles with a semicircular swing as he turned to face its back, joined Henrinn with the battle. He could hear his drill instructor complaining about form, but a falling body brought him back. Sidestepping the corpse, Henrinn flowed into another brawl, a half step and a quick gut slice knocking the creature off balance enough for an axe to cleave into its neck. He turned just in time to see a were-walker winding up for a swipe with its gashing claws. Stepping into and under the blow, Henrinn sliced off its arm at the bend. Another step carried him to the now disarmed side, and a twist let the scout thrust into the beast's chest.

As it slumped onto the ground, Henrinn found himself in a lull. Enemies still came through the cracked gate, but in fewer numbers, some wounded were-walkers attempting to flee the closing wall of blades approaching the gate. Catching his breath, his focus faded away. The

clashing steel and bone, plate crunching under teeth, and yelps of pain slammed his ears at once. A mixture of blood and sweat created the battlefield's stench, and he tasted iron in his mouth. A cocky smile spread across Henrinn's mud stained face. Despite everything else, he'd survi-

A group of icicles stabbed into his back. The air left his lungs, and no matter the gasping he couldn't grab another. The cold kept reaching deeper, slicing through his torso, and Henrinn looked down to see his armor pushing outward and his flesh stretch over the new mountains popping over his front. A faint snap echoed out as the skin gave way and he saw a were-walker's clawed hand burst from him. In an instant, it receded, leaving only the hole.

He fell to the side, stunned as intestines and gore spilled from the gaping wound. He tried to mutter "Why?" but couldn't speak around the blood filling his mouth. Something stepped on his leg, followed by blood splashing onto his cheek. Somewhere, Tiarnan called his name, and a snarl answered from above his head. But Henrinn couldn't focus on that. He kept blinking, hoping to see the Warrior descending. He felt something rip from his shoulder. He'd paid his debt, hadn't he? All Henrinn had to do was wait. Maybe just closing his eyes would help.

He felt so tired.