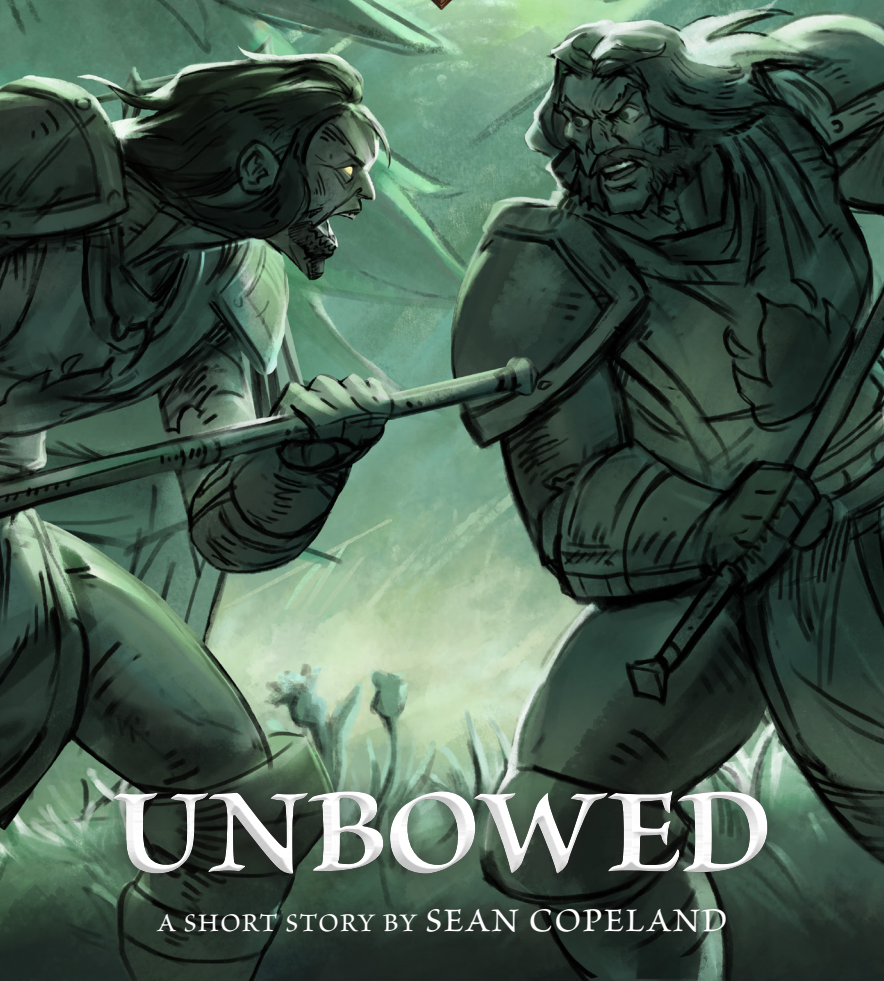




UNBOWED

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UNBOWED

The blade of the scarlet crusader cleaved the head from the shoulders of the Forsaken woman in a single glowing swing. Two nearby paladins cheered as if they had witnessed a Darkmoon Faire trick instead of an execution.

“Murderer!” a bound Forsaken rasped.

“Amusing coming from a damned corpse,” the crusader quipped back.

Cormack tilted his head slightly at the voice. It was one he would never forget and sparked no joy in the recollection. A distant relative. A friend. A brother-in-arms.

His murderer. Scarlet Crusader Arec Mistmantle.

The yellow glow of unblinking eyes watched the scene from a distance with the stillness of something that had forgotten breath. The Holy Light began to gather faintly in his hands where he parted the bushes, its glow slowly healing the dead skin underneath. Cormack shook his hands from sudden pain as if his hands had caught fire. The glow faded along with the pain it caused.

The man stepped from Cormack’s broken memories into reality before his eyes. His armor was immaculate and his cloak unblemished, the kind of cleanliness that only existed for those who never set foot on the battlefield unless forced. Cormack’s fingers





tightened around the warhammer he did not remember removing from the harness on his back.

“Crusaders! Let’s honor this hunt with a pyre. We’ll purify these monsters in tribute to someone important. Let’s see, we’ll need a true paragon of the Light for this.”

Arec snapped his fingers in mock expression of insight as the name further twisted the sadistic smile on his face.

“I know just the soul.” He turned, dusting invisible grime from his gauntlet. “Gavinrad the Dire.”

The name inexplicitly caused something to snap inside Cormack as he let out a guttural cry. “TRAITOR!”

A hammer comprised of pure Light rocketed out from his hiding place and struck Arec in the chest. The impact was not a sound so much as a detonation. The hammer struck so violently that the shockwave dented his plate armor and sent dirt flying where his body had landed.

Cormack charged forward with his warhammer ready before the surprise of his attack faded from the other crusaders. A blade was reflexively raised to block Cormack’s advance, but Cormack struck down the wielder with contemptuous ease as whispers of the Holy Light followed the path of his hammer blows.

“Should have stayed buried,” Arec said raggedly as he staggered to his feet. “But now I get to kill you twi—”

A second hammer of Light stopped the crusader mid-sentence. Bone and armor folded together with a satisfying finality, ruining the crusader’s helmet and forcing him to remove it. Arec’s counterattack came unnaturally fast, the man’s injuries and momentum aided by the Holy Light. Arec’s hammer caught Cormack’s left hand under its immense weight, nearly severing it from the arm. Cormack screamed and put distance between them to examine the injury. Ichor flowed freely from the hand as it hung at an ugly angle.

Arec slowly approached Cormack to deal a deadly blow with his warhammer.

“Time to die, monster.”

“At long last.”

Arec tensed his muscles to bring the hammer down upon Cormack’s smirking face with all the strength left in his battered body. The blow never came. A hammer of Light slammed into his exposed head from above. Blood flowed freely from the wound into

his vision as the world shifted beneath him. For a moment it seemed impossible that he remained standing at all. Yet he did, sustained by little more than his defiance. Defiance that would only serve to provide Arec a clear view of the last thing he would ever see.

Cormack crossed the short distance between them with terrifying speed, so quickly that he seemed to outrun his own shadow. Cormack crashed into Arec and seized him in an embrace that mocked the countless others before they had shared as family.

Cormack's jaws opened wider than they had before in life and drove his teeth into the sickly-sweet flesh of Arec's exposed throat. Arec's eyes went wide with shock. Cormack bit down with all the force he could muster and tore backward with savage force. The flesh of Arec's ruined throat tore like wet fabric. Blood sprayed across armor and earth. A wet, bubbling sound escaped Arec as the ruin of his throat came free from Cormack's teeth.

For a brief instant they remained locked in the fatal embrace until Arec's strength finally failed him. He collapsed as Cormack stood over him, blood running down his chin and dripping back onto his victim.

Silence fell. Not a clean silence, as sounds of plate armor clanked as the body thrashed in the dirt in its death throes. It was everything Arec deserved. But still, Cormack wondered, "What have I become . . . ?"

Cormack stood alone amid the wreckage of the Forsaken caravan and its assailants. He suddenly recalled the survivors and found them missing, evidence they had fled as soon as the fighting had commenced. The tracks he found were of panicked souls running, crawling, and moving any way they could to distance themselves from the battle.

The pain Cormack had been holding at bay suddenly forced him down to one knee. What he had always known as warmth in life, familiar and comforting, was now agony in his undeath.

Each time Cormack called upon the Holy Light, forced it to crawl through his ruined body, it had the consequence of stitching flesh that naturally refused correction, searing pain from deadened nerves that should not have reawakened. He grabbed his ruined hand, adjusted it to the correct angle of usefulness, and braced himself to channel the Light through it.

He began speaking the soft, earnest prayer to the Light to heal his mangled hand. It answered as it always did now in death. Violently and mercilessly.

Time lost all meaning as the healing began. Shattered bones forcefully knit themselves together. Rotting flesh stretched across places of his hand where bone was clearly visible.





Every inch of the healing process burned with a pain so debilitating that Cormack's unnatural vision went white. To keep conscious, Cormack bit down on the handle of his warhammer and screamed until something in his jaw cracked. The pain of that new injury healing added to the symphony of suffering playing out throughout Cormack's being.

As the Light blessedly faded, Cormack remained kneeling, his chest moving with the mimicry of breathing. It was a long while before he had the will to stand.

As he got to his feet, his eyes dropped to his tabard that hung from his shoulders. Once it was pristine white, marked in red with the fire of purpose, faith, and certainty. Now, much like his body, it was a tattered ruin.

He brushed at it absently. For a moment, he saw it as he did the day it was draped upon him. Light seemingly coming from the very fabric, the weight of purpose falling on his shoulders instead of undeath. The tabard of the Scarlet Crusade.

Cormack began following the tracks where the undead survivors had fled. He had questions about his condition, ones that only they could answer. He figured he deserved that for saving them. The forest pressed inward as he followed the hurried track. While exhausted from wielding the Light, he reasoned even in his state that the woods ahead were too quiet . . . too watchful.

The feeling of a gaze upon him never wavered; it followed him as he followed the trail too close for comfort. Though what dissected Cormack from afar was neither animals nor the survivors he sought—oh no, it was something else.

Something far more patient.

Their trail was not hard to follow. The path of panicked people never was.

Cormack moved through the dense forest at a steady, unhurried pace, his boots pressing into the same soft earth the fugitives' feet had upturned in their flight. Broken twigs, shallow grooves dragged by uneven steps, the occasional smear of ichor. All signposts for those who knew how to read them, and they had not gone far.

Their makeshift camp came into view as the trees thinned. Though it was little more than a cluster of ragged bodies pretending to rest, every head turned as Cormack approached.

Recognition came quickly, not at his face, but the tabard he wore. Hands rose and trembled among all but one. An undead woman stepped forward, long flowing robes patched and torn, her eyes alight with a sickly yellow brilliance that had nothing to do with life.

Cormack regarded them quietly. "I'm glad I found you."

The woman spoke for the group. "To finish the job?"

Cormack scoffed at the accusation. "Don't be simple. Then why would I have helped?"

Her tone moved from sarcasm to anger.

"Help?! They destroyed everything!" She laughed in exasperation. "Our lives included! We're dead to begin with because of your damn crusade!"

Cormack's head tilted, slow and deliberate. "Doubtful," he said. "You just weren't strong enough to protect what mattered."

The words landed as an unintended slap to the face. The woman's countenance shifted from hot anger to cold, murderous intent. Motes of fire began to gather in her palms, coiling inward with chaotic movement. Flames fully snapped into existence around her hands, the air cracking as heat and the chill of the night air warred for dominance.

"Say. That. Again."

Cormack didn't have to; he had seen that look countless times before on living faces. No response would avoid what was coming.

A lance of fire screamed through the air toward him. Not clean and controlled as he had seen other magi cast before; it flew furious and erratic. It struck a glancing blow against his shoulder, flash heating the armor it kissed. The heat of the mage's flame felt like a warm breeze compared to the searing pain he now felt as the Light had answered his call.

Cormack spoke a quick prayer as he charged forward, aided by the Light.

The mage cursed at the sight and erected a barrier of arcane magic around herself, runic-tinged words spilling forth from her lips. Sharp, rapid, and practiced. Arcane runes flared into existence, folding over one another as reality twisted to accommodate the magic.

Cormack's hammer aimed not at the mage but at the ground just before her. A shockwave of force and dirt splashed outward, meant to break the mage's concentration as he had been taught in the Scarlet Monastery. The earth parted from the impact of his warhammer but was empty of his enemy.





A howl of frozen wind slammed against his back. Creeping frost seized the moveable parts of his armor, sneaked into the gaps, and froze the tabard clinging to his chest.

The mage had repositioned herself, hands moving again, preparing her next assault. The arcane magic exploded forward, a burst of cold that froze the space between them with a frost so intense it crystallized the air itself. Cormack fought against his frozen bonds. The Light surged out from him, not in defense but in defiance. Its energies—or his screams, Cormack was not sure—tore through the ice, parted the air, and devoured them in equal measure.

The Light's pain was immediate and overwhelming. His rotting flesh split where each point of its holy energies forced itself outward. Ichor oozed down his arms, hissing and evaporating completely where the lingering Light healed it. He did not stop.

The mage repositioned again. She was visibly unnerved at Cormack's defiance, and the paladin was upon her before she could complete her spell. The warhammer came around in a brutal arc. The mage braced for impact but relied on the strength of her barrier to protect her as she finished her incantation. It was annihilated on impact.

The hammerhead caught the mage in the torso instead of the head where Cormack aimed, but the force was more than enough to be effective. Ribs cracked. Bone and skin fragments flew. The spell forming in her hands collapsed, detonating suddenly in an arcane backlash that sent them both flying in opposite directions.

A moment later the mage tried to rise, but Cormack stood above her with his warhammer held high. She barely rolled out of the way in time as the hammer smashed into the ground hard enough to leave a small crater beside her head.

She lashed out at him with a small blast of arcane magic. No form in its pattern, no time and preparation in its planning. Just raw directed force. Cormack endured the impact. The Light flared again and his screams of pain along with it. Cormack's gauntleted hand caught her by the throat, lifted her off the ground, and slammed her decaying body back to the ground with immense force without breaking the grip on his foe.

"Begone."

The command was spoken softly. The Light had heard his call and answered. A brilliant flash of Light shot forth from his hand and into his captive. Golden, radiant, and merciless in its exorcism. Holy energies surged into the mage, climbing up her face

and down her torso, burning every inch of undead flesh as if it were as flammable as oil.

Cormack screamed as the Light seared both captive and caster alike. It snaked upward along Cormack's arm, burning its way across his ruined flesh as much as his enemy's. His grip on her throat tightened reflexively, jaw clenching hard enough to fracture teeth.

The mage was pinned, convulsing from the agony of the Holy Light consuming her. Cormack loomed over her in her throes, breathing without breath.

The Light continued to scorch his arm, consuming him as much as her. Cormack soon weakened from the immense pain, his grip loosening as his command wavered.

"Enough," he rasped.

The searing energies mercifully subsided, the Light vanishing as quickly as he'd asked it to appear. The entire area fell into a terrible stillness. The mage coughed up ichor and spat it forward, laughter threading through the pain.

"Well, I'll be damned again," she managed. "You are like us after all."

Cormack said nothing. He did not have to; the slowly increasing slack of his grip spoke louder than his silence.

"I know what you see," she spat. "Abominations. Things to be put down without mercy." Her eyes locked on Cormack's tabard.

"You even watched the others enjoy it before you stopped them. Why, crusader? Did you enjoy it? Between us abominations, who is the real monster?"

Cormack closed his eyes and exhaled in the reflex of breath. The mage braced for a reprisal for her words, but it never came.

The mage was released but was unwilling to rise immediately afterward as if expecting a trick. She soon rose and walked straight up to Cormack. Close. Too close. Cormack did not move. The mage leaned in, studying him with something that might have once been curiosity. She took a step back and reached into her own face.

Spiked fingers dug into her cheek, pulling at dead flesh without care or interest and without her eyes ever breaking his gaze. Her fingers suddenly stopped and jerked free from her face. Within her fingers a maggot wriggled. The mage flicked it at him. It struck Cormack's face and fell.

"No one wanted this," she said, voice steady. "Becoming a mockery of everything we were in life. To exist each day leashed to a presence forcing you to do unspeakable

things. Only to have free will now and exist in a world that sees you as something to be rid of. To be truly forsaken.”

Cormack’s hand tightened on the handle of the warhammer in hand at his side.

“But our Dark Lady changed all that,” the mage went on. “Gave this existence meaning. She carved out a place in this miserable world where we do not have to constantly look over our shoulders or wonder if we deserve to exist.”

She gestured to the others. “To have one place in all of Azeroth where no one tries to return you to the dirt.” Silence settled.

“If death is too great a challenge for you, we’ll happily help you return.” A thin smile formed on her face as the other survivors assembled behind her in solidarity.

“I need no help. From you or any other.” Cormack hung his head as the group returned to their unburning campfire. The forest watched. The survivors spoke among themselves quickly and departed, leaving Cormack alone once more.

Is this what I choose?

His gaze turned to his tabard. For the briefest of moments, it was clean again in his memory. He stood at attention, shoulders straight, the weight of it new and earned. The commander’s praise of his victories echoed in his head, proud and unyielding.

Cormack remembered believing in the cause of the Scarlet Crusade. Remembered the conviction that came with that unshakable belief. He looked now at what remained. His tabard hung in tatters in death, a relic just like himself.

Cormack reached up, gripped the emblem of the Scarlet Crusade, and tore it from his chest. The fabric ripped free from his armor in uneven strips, and he let it fall in the dirt without ceremony.

His warhammer soon followed. The weight of it hit the ground with a dull thud. Cormack began moving forward, eyes fixed on something ahead only he could see.

Where the hammer rested, a hand later reached down to reclaim it. It was marred yet reverent of the artifact it retrieved.

A finger traced the length of its weathered handle, one that appeared loved and worn by many years of diligent use and care. The finger continued its examination of the handle until it stopped on a faint carving almost lost to wear and time. A message was carved by a familiar hand and contained words important to every paladin that swore an oath to the Holy Light.

No'Darador.

We serve.

The Light flickered faintly along the length of the warhammer as the woman thought about the weapon's original owner, as if it awaited his return.

Cormack stood at the edge of his own grave.

The earth had been upturned, clawed open from within. His return to the living world had been as violent as it had been when he was taken from it. The open grave beckoned him as he knelt, his fingers sifting the upturned soil at its edge. The call of oblivion was dark and welcoming.

"Strange. It does not read 'Cormack the Coward' on that headstone."

So mired in his reverie, Cormack did not sense the approach of another. It did not matter. "I had hoped someone would come along and add the dirt back on me," he replied without turning to face the voice.

"And what a waste that would be," it said. "You trained your whole life in service of others, not to quit when it became difficult."

Cormack turned sharply. The anger and accusation came first. Defensive. Ready. As if he had been wrestling with that very question all this time.

"And what could you possibly know about me?" he snapped.

His anger cooled at the sight he beheld. The voice walked into the moonlight, whole in posture but not in form. Her hair was the color of a faded red rose, cut short and close to the jaw. The kind of cut worn by another who expects battle, not admiration. Practical, deliberate, and purposeful. Her armor spoke the same truth. Plate, forged in purple hues now muted to a tired gleam. Cormack could see it was not neglected but stripped of luster by long use. He assumed much like the person, it was unmeant to shine but endure. But it was her eyes that marked who she was beyond all doubt. Eyes that held awareness without life. Dead, just as he was.

She was shaped by death, honed by survival, and carried forward by something inexplicable. "More than you know," she said calmly. "My name is Danitha, and I chose to fill my grave," she continued, "not return to it."





Cormack's grip tightened into a fist at his side. Silence stretched between them. At last, "Then you made the wrong choice," Cormack said.

"Or the more difficult one," she replied as Cormack turned his back on her.

"There is no real choice," he said flatly. "Only necessary ones for us monsters."

"Necessary? To whom?" she asked.

The bones of Cormack's hand slamming into the metal into his breastplate accentuated the return of his anger. "Me," he snapped. "Something the Light rejects? Feared by those I swore to protect?" He looked down into the grave. "Yes."

Another pause. "No," she insisted.

Cormack mocked an exhausted sigh, his decision seemingly already made. "Spare me."

"As you wish," she replied. "But help me understand something first." She stepped closer. "The Light rejects you," she said plainly. "It tears at you every time you call upon it. Yet despite the terrible cost, you still call upon it. Curious," she finished.

Cormack stood deathly still.

"I need no eyes to see you are struggling."

Cormack laughed in response. A short, bitter laugh that held no mirth. "You are mistaking a lifetime of training and reflexes for purpose."

"And you are mistaking this as noble." The jab landed between the soft spaces between his mental armor. He turned to face her, anger simmering behind his eyes.

"As I see it," she continued, "only two things keep those of us with free-will from returning to oblivion. The first is being strong enough to stand when the world rejects you. The second? Maintaining the will to fight despite that."

The unnatural light from Cormack's eyes flickered slightly as he fought the anger within as she continued.

"Twice now, you have proved capable of this." She stepped closer. "What I see in front of me is vastly more important than what lies behind you."

Cormack studied her. "Why did you follow me?"

A faint smile appeared on her face as her hands turned upward as if caught in a lie. "I had to know." She tilted her head. "So humor me. Why suffer the Light at all?"

He did not answer. The question elicited faint memories of pride pulled from the

recesses of his mind like a dream just beyond reach to remember. Important moments to him in life lost in undeath.

“My teacher ever stressed that paladins were created as an ideal. They were supposed to fight for those who could not do so themselves. He hammered that home after every lesson.”

Cormack looked up at her inquisitively. Her words felt familiar, as if he'd heard them before but was lost in death.

She said it simply. “Your father. Gavinrad the Dire.”

Cormack's world stopped and narrowed itself to the small space between them. Danitha slowly reached behind her back. “And what he gave you,” she said almost offhandedly, “should never be cast aside.”

The warhammer struck the ground at his feet. Cormack stared at the weapon as if he were seeing it for the first time. The worn bindings. The cracked hammerhead. And the message his father left for him on the haft. His hand moved without thinking to reclaim what felt like a lost but found piece of him. Touched it.

A memory suddenly returned. Warmth. A bearded smile. A steady voice and hand on his trembling shoulders.

“The world has many problems with no easy answers, my son. As we struggle with our choices, no matter how small or great, remember that the Light is there for you. You must be willing to ask for its help with your whole heart.”

The memory was lost once again. In its place, Cormack felt purpose. He fell to his knees and spoke a fervent prayer for the first time since his awakening. Asking for the path, to be free of undeath or to endure it to the end. The Light did not take long to answer.

Holy energies set every inch of Cormack aflame. Seeking. Burning. Consuming. Every fiber of his being screamed as Light burned its way into his corpse with heat so intense Cormack thought the answer he'd received was incineration. Every muscle in his body constricted and tore to the point of further mutilation of form. His mind so near fracturing under the weight of the pain that overwhelmed him. His mind screamed to resist, to reject what was happening to him. With the very last sliver of his sanity, Cormack slowly opened his arms.

“Father,” he whispered with a voice too soft to be heard by anyone.

The conflagration of Light twisted and burned to his entreaty, holy energies burning brighter than before until it suddenly stopped and darkness returned to the space between the paladins once more. Cormack dared not move. The pain of his prayer remained upon his cursed form, but it now shifted within. Changed. The agony remained, but beneath it was something new entirely.

Warmth. Hope. The blessings of the Light itself.

Cormack's eyes opened wide with the revelation. His hands glowed, Light dancing around his fingers, not devouring them but settling. Healing. He flexed his fingers and raised a hand to his face, touching the dead flesh beneath. And for the first time since his return, he felt something. Truly felt something. Cold. Rough. Real. Cormack stared up at Danitha.

"You're not alone in this," she said softly. "You deserve to stand among us, brother."

She held her hand out to Cormack. "Esarus no'Darador, son of Gavinrad." The words struck home more than any of the words that came before. "By blood and honor," she said, "you may yet serve."

The phrase in Old Tongue lingered in his mind. It was an oath. A promise. One he had sworn in life returned to him in death. Cormack clasped his hand on her wrist, and she pulled him upward deliberately, the reclaimed hammer held firmly in his hand. When he met her smile, something within him had steadied for the very first time. Not restored, not perfect, but whole. Cormack stepped away from the grave.

"Show me the way home, sister."

