

### *Howls: Book One, Chapter 14, verses 3-8*

3 A great scourge will come from the north, bringing weapons and terror unknown. It will tread over our ancient enemy as though they were soft soil and it will threaten the wolves with destruction.

4 None shall stay its hand. Our children will not know defeat, but neither will they know victory.

5 While they hide themselves from this threat, their values will change. Shelter will be valued above possessions. Friendship shall be highly prized. Trust will become priceless. Tarnished silver shall be esteemed as gold and polished copper shall be esteemed as platinum.

6 At that day, we will bless our people. We will protect our people. And if they stay true to us, we will stay true to them.

7 Before that day, a wolf will be born among you: a judge, a companion, a savior.

8 During those troubled times that one will lead you, protect you, nurture you. Like a pup is guarded by watchful parents, so will you be kept safe in your den.



Mountain peaks surround the northern border of Vharkylia, protecting it from its rather aggressive neighbor, Rhidayar. While there're many passes through those mountains, only one has sufficient space to move large groups safely through it. The northern human nation made use of the other passes in the past, but repeated heavy losses gave the wolf-like vykati confidence that those passes needed minimal watching.

Before the establishment of Vharkylia as a formal nation, before the wolves bothered with anything like organized cities, a small church was built in the main pass. Who built it still isn't known, but it was the vykati that built it into the military compound it'd become. Originally, it was expansive and held an entire division, with two more divisions stationed within two hundred kilometers to the southeast and southwest.

Decades of peace made that seem unnecessary. Those three outposts held the highest concentration of the wolves' standing army and with the establishment of larger cities, like Riteyai and Drithen, the country's leadership felt it was important to keep more soldiers stationed closer to the massing population. The inner outposts were reduced to single infantry brigades and Altaza was held by only a small artillery battalion. Almost all the Wolf Pack leadership protested the reductions, but the Riteyai Lords and Drithen Council both refused to accommodate any larger units. It was very expensive to bring supplies to the inner outposts and the cost of bringing them to Altaza was almost exponential.

Surrounded by a stone wall, with a single steel gate on the south end, it stood about four meters high and ran about 300 meters north/south and 200

meters east/west, the chapel complex contained two large wooden barracks, a smaller barracks for the officers and a small one room structure that doubled as the commander's office and home. The mess hall was near the northern center of the compound and all of those structures were dwarfed by the massive stone chapel that rose up in the exact middle. The building was a single story structure, but the roof that topped it was steep and three times the height of its walls. Windows, plain and with slightly subdued glass, stood about a meter off the ground and a meter and half high. On the final eastern side, the one that had no slope or gable, a huge stained-glass window stood adorned with the image of the Aspects of ferocity, Kunterik and his unnamed mate. They were holding hands and facing each other as they howled at an unseen moon.

It was a single complex, sitting on a lonely mountain pass, surrounded by wildflowers and granite. It was the picture of serenity and peace.

In a perfect world that peace is assumed, but in a fallen world, like ours, it only exists if one is willing to defend it.



The explosion rocked the outer wall of the church complex at Altaza. The wooden platform holding a cannon shuddered and the artillery piece nearly fell off, but through a hurried effort by the three vykati stationed at it, it was kept up.

Their commander, a fairly short wolf with copper fur, grabbed onto one of the supports and leaped on top of the platform. "Cease fire!" she shouted mid-leap. "You won't hit it at that angle!" Grabbing the muzzle with one gloved hand and releasing its lock with the other, she moved the cannon a matter of centimeters and slammed the lock down into place. She pulled her hand from the muzzle and shook the heat off. "Fire!" she shouted.

The weapon obliged. About a half kilometer out an explosion erupted and those on the platform could see the enemy cannon, its wheels splintering and debris shooting into the air around it, fly a good five meters into the air and land with its barrel partially buried in the soft ground.

The commander, a wolf named Malita Adida shouted. "Reload! What're you waiting for?" Enemy troops were cresting the hill and her sights were fixed on them.

"We're out of round shot, colonel and only have enough powder for maybe two more shots, even if we had something to fire."

There was a brief moment of complete silence. None of the cannons, now spread out to all sides of the compound were firing. "Fill her with stones if you must," she shouted, "and fire at close range."

"Yes sir," the cannoneer said.

The copper wolf jumped from the platform and started down the line issuing the same order as she went. A few more cannons had managed to fire, but most were also out of ammunition. She moved some powder to a position that still had round shot, but there wasn't much more to be done with the

cannons. Rifles were now firing as the enemy approached the outer walls. A voice shouted to her from behind. “Sir, they’ve breached the south wall!” Metal clanged against metal as the defenders and attackers met at close quarters.

War howls were sounding throughout the compound, but it didn’t seem to be phasing the enemy much. It was at this moment, for the first time since learning of the impending attack, that the wolf leader felt truly helpless. She always knew the odds and was constantly made aware of the hopelessness felt by most of her troops, but up until that exact moment, she believed that she could overcome the opposition by force of will alone. Now, as she looked out over the smoke covered battlefield, hope fled. Reinforcements would *not* arrive in time. This place was her grave.

But all that passed in less than a second. *No*, Malita thought and there was a growl to her internal voice. *My daughter needs me. I must live. I must stop them from going further into the country.* She issued her order in a voice that contained none of her prior doubt. “Fall back to the chapel before they breach the other walls. Have the south wall retreat as best as possible.”

Her orders were relayed and she herself charged to the south wall, her sword ringing as it came from its sheath. As she charged forward, a bullet pierced her left shoulder. Malita didn’t even slow but forced her blade against the saber of one of the attackers. She shouted to the soldier who she’d just defended. “To the chapel! Now!”

The soldier ran as the copper wolf received blow after blow. Just before she dispatched her foe, she was cut by an enemy that came from her left. “Coward!” she shouted as a single thrust disarmed and destroyed her second attacker. Glancing around her, she saw that the other defenders were now clear of the wall—those that’d lived. The place reeked of blood and smoke. Malita walked quickly backwards toward the doors of the chapel, striking down two more opponents and taking another bullet, this one to her side.

Rifle fire was issuing from the windows of the chapel. It was the most defensible building they had. The Aspects would forgive her sacrilege, the commander was sure. She somehow made it through the door and looked about her. Around the edges of the large auditorium, teams of two were firing from the windows—one reloading while the other fired. Just during her brief glance around, she saw more than one of her soldiers fall and be replaced by another. The pews had been splintered and stacked in a far corner and someone had bothered to set up a mess area. There were trays of food scattered about, mostly uneaten. The only thing left to show the building’s original purpose was the alter on the far end. It remained untouched and was still holding the vessels used at the last service, only hours before the attack came three days ago.

The center of the nave was made into a makeshift infirmary. All the cots were full, and more wounded were set on rough reed mats if not directly on the stone floor. Based on what she could see, and the few straggling in from

outside, there were less than 30 left of her original 100 soldiers. What little she'd been able to gather of what was happening outside her compound, the enemy had lost nearly half its number in repeated and vain attempts to assault the walls. Almost all of the opposing artillery had been eliminated in the first hours of battle. The defender's accuracy made it difficult for the Rhidayan artillery to get into range. The one scouting mission she'd sent out never returned, so she'd no idea if the enemy had any supplies or reinforcements on the way.

Malita's mind returned to her current surroundings. Staring at her from the center of the chapel was the young and newly assigned battalion chaplain. His uniform was torn. There was blood coming from several wounds. There were tears in his eyes and a light layer of plaster dust covered his black fur. "I'm the only healer left and I have no spells. We're out of bandages and are being forced to use the clothing off our dead."

Part of Colonel Adida wanted to cry with him, but such a show of emotion would kill what little resolve her soldiers had left. It was very important to keep morale up. Every enemy they could fell was one less for Lahnk and Ghenis to worry about. An idea came to her. It wasn't much, but any comfort she could offer to the chaplain and the rest of the survivors was well worth it. "I'll have something for you in a moment." She told the chaplain. The copper furred wolf walked quickly up to the soldier running the mess area. He had a foot in a split, and he was leaning against a pair of crutches. "What's to eat?" she asked.

The soldier looked very confused and eyed her suspiciously. She probably did look like she was fetching from the deep current, but he answered quickly. "About all that's left is this lettuce, sir." He pointed to a bin full of slightly wilted leaves.

"Any vinegar?" she asked.

This question, in the face of all else that was happening, completely stunned the poor soldier. He tried to stutter out an answer.

Malita interrupted him, "Any vinegar? Give me what you have."

The soldier, still unable to speak, handed her a small cruet of liquid.

She took it and poured it into the empty canteen on her belt. Not entirely vinegar, since it'd been used as dressing. Vinegar and oil would work just as well for what she wanted.

This action further confused the mess soldier.

She told him quickly, "I need it to make a healing potion. Get to one of the windows. We need everyone we have." Not waiting to see if the answer satisfied the cook, she ran back to the chaplain and approached him with an outstretched hand, motioning that he was to come close enough for her to whisper to him. He did so, and she quickly and quietly spoke to him, "Chaplain, you've done a wonderful job." He tried to interrupt her, but she continued, "I want you to do exactly as I tell you. I'm going to give you a canteen of oil and vinegar." She again spoke through another attempted

interruption, “Take it, but try not to let anyone see it.” The canteen was passed off and the chaplain stayed silent. “Again, try to not let people see you, but I want you to pour it in the chalice on the altar. Then sprinkle some of it on the foreheads of the wounded. Tell them it’s a healing salve.” The realization of what was happening seemed to slowly be dawning on the chaplain’s face. “Now, nod a couple times and say out loud, ‘Thank you, sir, I didn’t know we had that.’ Can you do that?”

He more than complied and said aloud, “Oh thank the Aspects, sir. I had no idea that was left. I assumed it’d already been used.” Following the rest of her instructions, he began going to the mat of each wounded soldier, talking to them if they were conscious and dabbing a little of the mixture on the forehead of each. While there didn’t seem to be much of a difference from where Malita was standing, she could see that some relaxed a little.

It was a small relief, but it was all she could offer. It gave her a small moment of retrospect.

Looking over at the altar, a quick mantra passed through her mind. Referencing the Aspect of ferocity, she thought, *Kunterik be with us as we fight for what we love*. The phrase, “for what we love” echoed in her mind for a few seconds. She loved her husband. She loved her daughter—her little fox. Everything from when she first learned of the approaching army up to this point and everything that’d happen until she died, was for what she loved. Her husband would understand. He would know and hopefully, when Sajani was older, he’d be able to explain it to her. He was just as brave to give up his career as a soldier and stay with their daughter as she could ever be in the line of duty. And then, in a way that could only come from the divine, given the chaos and thundering of weapon fire all about her, she knew peace. Here she would die, and her sacrifice would have deep meaning.

The chaplain approached her and pulled her from her thoughts, though not from the peace she was feeling. Keeping up appearances must have also been important to him by this point as well. “I’ve given the salve to all of them. Some it helped more than others. Is there anything else I can do? I feel like there should be something more I can do, but...” his voice trailed off.

So at the end of it all, it came down to the commander for both physical and spiritual direction. Still at peace, she answered, “Then pray, friend. Pray that somehow Ghenis and Lahnk will arrive early.” No sooner had she spoken then the smell of burning wood assaulted her.

“Sir,” a nearby soldier shouted to her, “They’ve set the roof afire.”

That showed a little more forethought than the attacks up to this point. She was hoping they’d not think tactically when she pulled her troops back here. There wasn’t much left to be done. Her options were depleted. She turned to a nearby sergeant. At other times, she’d probably be able to remember his name, but not now. Her mind was focused entirely on keeping her people together. “Find out how much ammunition is left!” she ordered.

The sergeant didn't even need to turn. "We've used all the reserves we managed to pull back. I just delivered the last tin. We have less than one magazine left at each station."

A little worse than she thought, but not by much. Holding the chapel now meant either suffocating or being shot where they stood when they could no longer return fire. There was only one option left to a wolf.

"What are your orders, sir?" the sergeant asked.

"To the door! We'll press out and make our stand there. I'll not die cornered like a scared dog! Those that can't or won't are welcome to stay it out here. We'll try to put out the fires once we've retaken the compound." There was no chance of that happening, she knew that, but there also was no reason to dash their hopes. "Who's with me! For Vharkylia!"

Not waiting to see who was following her, she charged out the door, saber in hand. A few shots were fired by her own people, giving her some cover as she and eventually the rest of her soldiers still able to stand, including their chaplain, broke from the chapel. A tactically smart enemy would've been waiting for her to leave the building, but this crazy general from Rhidayar wasn't acting smart at all and didn't seem to mind how many soldiers he lost as a result.

There was an enemy just outside the door, armed only with a sword. Perhaps they were low on ammunition as well. That would certainly make things easier for Ghenis when he arrived. The charge surprised the foe and a single swipe disarmed her opponent, another dropped him to the ground. Had she been cut during the attack? She couldn't tell. The rest came as a blur. She'd struck down another three enemies and took five more bullets before the final shot came.

The adrenaline strength and fanatical resolve drained quickly. Dropping to her knees, she tried to take in all that was happening, but her vision had blurred, and she could feel the sting of a cut on her forehead. After less than a moment, the strength to even stay on her knees left her and she fell to her side, looking back towards the chapel. From where she was lying, she could not see a single wolf from her battalion. The gunfire ceased, whether in actuality or because she couldn't hear, she'd no way of knowing.

As she lay on the ground and watched her vision slowly close around her, she thought of her husband and daughter. This enemy didn't stand a chance against Ghenis and Lahnk. She'd weakened them more than sufficiently. Her family and her people were safe now. With a huge effort, she breathed out her final words. No one would be there to hear them. No one would be able to relay them to the people that mattered, but she felt like she had to say them.

"Sajani'et al'ark."

The blackness overtook her, and she found herself going almost immediately to her next and greater incarnation.