

The Vampire 881

Chapter 881: Impossible Hope

Olwyna watched the men arm themselves with whatever crude weapons they could find, and her heart sank even further. These men weren't soldiers at all. They were craftsmen and farmers, many of whom had never swung anything heavier than a hammer or scythe. How could they hope to stand against the creatures that had taken her husband?

And yet, as she watched them pick up everything from shovels to garden rakes, she didn't see a single man turning away when his turn to take a weapon came. They were afraid, some more than others. Many shifted nervously, giving their improvised weapons awkward practice swings as they found their place in ranks behind overturned tables, but none of them ran and hid in their cellars or tried to flee from the south gate.

"Your father should be here," she whispered as she pressed both hands to her belly, feeling the child move restlessly within her. "He should be the one protecting us, not..." she tried to say, but she couldn't finish the thought. Not lying dead in some unmarked grave from the wounds he suffered in the horrible duel against the demon knight. Not captured and tortured by demons, living his days in agony alongside his soldiers. Not any of the terrible possibilities that had haunted her for half a month.

The baby kicked hard against her ribs, as if responding to her distress, and she had to bite her lip to keep from crying out. Everything hurt these days. Her back hurt, her feet hurt, but more than anything, her heart ached like it had been carved out of her chest because the person who belonged there had been torn away from her.

"Sir Rhodri, Sir Rhodri," an out-of-breath soldier called as he pushed his way through the crowd of men to reach the old master's side. Like many of the soldiers who remained in the village when Carwyn left with his caravan, the soldier was older than most, but his eyes were still sharp and his grip on his mace was still firm, and that was enough as far as the old soldier was concerned.

"Yer lordship," the man said once he reached Sir Rhodri. "They've come up on the hillside an' they sent out men under a white banner. Demons, yer lordship, an' one of 'em's the demon knight what captured Sir Carwyn," he said confidently.

In the days after their caravan was taken, all of the wagon drivers and common farmers who had been allowed to escape returned with their own version of the story of what happened the day that Sir Carwyn dueled a Demon Knight for the safety of his men. They disagreed on the details, but all of them

had clearly described the serpentine demon with the strange plumed helm who slew Sir Carwyn's horse and then faced him in single combat.

"And?" Olwyn said, abandoning her position guiding women and children into the manor in order to join her father-in-law. "Is it true? Is my husband with them?"

"He, he is, yer ladyship," the old soldier said. "He's riding a horse, wearing his armor, and the Hounds of Belvin are clear as day on his shield and tabard, yer ladyship. If he's a prisoner or not, I can't say, but..." he started to say, only to trail off as he became uncertain of his next words.

"What? Out with it, man, time is precious," Sir Rhodri snapped.

"Yes, yes, yer lordship," the man said, wringing his hands as he searched for a way to explain what he'd seen. "It's just, you see, yer lordship... Yer son, er, Sir Carwyn, he, he rode at the head of the demons. He rode out five hundred paces from the gate an' then he held up a hand to halt the others an' I'll be cursed to an afterlife wandering the darkness if I lie, but the demons stopped when he said to stop, yer lordship."

"You're saying that these demons are following his orders?" Sir Rhodri said, staring in open-mouthed disbelief.

"He couldn't," Olwyn said, shaking her head fiercely. "He's a good man, he, he must be their prisoner!"

"What about the rest of the demons? What are they doing?" Sir Rhodri asked. His bushy white brows drew together in a fierce scowl, and the lines on his worn, leathery face grew even deeper as he tried to imagine what had happened to his son since he went missing half a month ago.

"Stopped, yer lordship," the old soldier said in a voice that suggested that he didn't believe what he was saying. "They pulled tha wagons and carts up far enough to see tha gates an' tha village, but then they jus' stopped."

"Did they form ranks? Organize their soldiers for a charge?" Sir Rhodri asked impatiently. His hands tightened on his reins, and for a moment, he was tempted to ride off to one of the watch towers himself

in order to get a look for himself, but he forced himself to stay calm until he had answers to his questions. "Did they bring out a ram for the gates or anything to burn down the walls?"

"No, yer lordship," the confused soldier said. "They jus', jus' stopped. Right there on the road like it were nothin' at all."

"Father-in-law," Olwyna said, placing a hand gently on Sir Rhodri's armored knee as she looked up at him with soft, pleading eyes. "If they rode out under a white banner..."

"I know what you're thinking, lass," the old knight said as his eyes softened beneath his snow-white brows. "But these demons know our ways, and they play fierce tricks to lure a man into their fiendish traps. If this is another one of their schemes..."

"But what if it isn't a trick?" Olwyna asked. "I, I don't think that Carwyn is leading them, he would never betray us like that. But, if he's a prisoner... if there's a chance to bargain for his life," she said, fumbling for words that would convince her father-in-law to take a chance, any chance, to save her husband's life.

She'd thought that he was lost forever when the villagers returned with word that he'd fallen in a duel and then the demons took him away, but now, hearing that he had returned and that he was well enough to ride a horse, even in this frigid weather... she had to believe there was a way that they could be together again.

"You're lucky that Acolyte Holm has already taken the elderly and the infirm into his temple," Sir Rhodri snorted. "I might burn for this, you know," he said as he gave his daughter-in-law the best smile he could manage under the circumstances.

In the end, as he looked down at the swollen belly that carried his grandchild, he couldn't bring himself to abandon the chance to bring home the soon-to-be-born child's father. And if it went badly... losing a grandfather for a chance to have the child's father welcome him into the world was a worthy trade.

"Go find me ten strong men who can look menacing," Sir Rhodri commanded the old soldier. "I'll ride out and speak to them. But make sure every man knows... we may not return alive from this. If they won't take the risk, don't shame them or force them."

"And tell them," Rhodri started to say, hesitating for a moment as he wrestled with his conscious before he looked his daughter-in-law in the eyes and said something that a good knight-protector of a village never should. "Tell them that if the chance comes, they need to carry my son home. I may not be able to fight the demons off for long, but I can buy them time enough to bring him back within the walls."

"After that," Rhodri said. "Everything will be up to my son."

"I understand, yer lordship," the old soldier said as he saluted with his fist to his chest before he dashed off in search of ten men who would be willing to risk their lives for a chance to rescue Sir Carwyn. Some men might think it would be impossible to find ten fools who would stand up to demons just to rescue one knight, but the old soldier had lived in Raek all his life.

He knew how much Sir Carwyn's selfless dedication to helping the village grow and prosper meant to everyone. He also knew how much greater Carwyn's stature had grown in the hearts and minds of the villagers when he fought a duel with a demon knight so that the common folk could flee and return home instead of being captured by the demons along with their wagons.

No, the old soldier wasn't worried about finding ten men who would try to help rescue Sir Carwyn. He was worried about what he would have to say to the eleventh man and everyone after him who wouldn't have a chance to repay their debts to the young knight who had already done so much for them.

Because if one thing was certain, it was that the Hounds of Belvin didn't hunt alone... and these men would do anything to bring the leader of their pack home.

Chapter 882: Under A White Banner (Part One)

Sir Carwyn sat nervously on his borrowed horse, wreathed in a cloud of steam from his own breath as he fought to project an aura of confidence. He wanted to pull his woolen cloak tight around him to keep warm in the fierce winter chill, but he'd thrown the cloak back to ensure that his tabard and the Belvin family crest upon it were in clear view to the men in the watch towers.

The minutes slipped by with an agonizing slowness, and only the occasional shifting of his horse broke the frozen silence of the morning. Occasionally, he could faintly hear the sounds of raised voices and frenzied activity from the village, but they were still too distant to make anything out.

Eventually, the heavy wooden gate opened to reveal an armored figure wearing the same Belvin family crest on his faded tabard, sitting astride an aging warhorse and followed by nearly a dozen villagers as he rode out under an improvised white banner that looked like it had begun life as a bedsheet.

"Your father?" Loftur asked on behalf of the serpentine Captain Barsali.

"It should be," Carwyn answered around a lump that had formed in his throat. "It's his armor and his horse, Blaze. He isn't the sort to dress someone else in his armor to deceive us."

"Captain Barsali says that your father wears the armor of a Champion who has won many victories," Loftur said after a brief conversation with the former champion. "He says that he can see where you gained your determination to keep fighting from, and that he hopes you will not have to fight your father today."

"I don't want to fight him either," Carwyn said softly as his father and the other villagers drew closer. "Stay here," the young knight commanded as he gently prodded his horse's ribs with his foot and rode out the last fifty paces to meet with the approaching men.

Seeing his son separating himself from the demons, Sir Rhodri gave a similar order, holding up his hand and telling the villagers to stop short while he rode out to meet his son.

"Carwyn," the aging knight asked as he raised the visor of his helm to reveal his worn, leathery face and bushy white eyebrows. "Is it really you, son?" He stopped his horse short of coming close enough to Carwyn to reach out to him, and while his left hand maintained its light grip on the reins, his right hand drifted down to the haft of the warhammer hanging from his waist.

"It is," Carwyn said as he pulled back the cowl that covered most of his head and kept the frost from his ears. "I'm sorry, Father," he said as moisture welled up in the corner of his eyes. "I... There are things we need to talk about, but first, can you tell me if Olwyna is well? She must be worried sick, and if anything happened to our child..." the young knight said, clutching the reins of his borrowed horse tightly enough that the animal shook its head and snorted in protest.

"She's barely slept," Sir Rhodri said as he visibly relaxed in his saddle. "Your mother has helped to make sure she's eating, but you're the sun in the sky for that lass," the aging knight said with a faint, slightly forced chuckle.

"She misses you," Rhodri said as he rode close enough to speak quietly. "So say the word, and the men behind me will help you reach the gates. They know they may not all make it back with you, but they all volunteered, for you," he said with a brief glance at the nervous but determined-looking men behind him. "I can keep the demons back long enough for you to reach your wife," he promised.

"No, no you can't," Carwyn said quickly, before his father got the wrong idea and tried something that everyone would come to regret. Of the ten men who had come with Sir Rhodri, Carwyn knew at least six of them, including Terrik, the smith who had forged his flail, and Bistal, the carter who built most of the wagons they used to haul their goods to market.

These were men that Carwyn had known for much of his life, and even if there was a gap in their station, he'd still considered them friends he could raise a flagon of ale with at the end of a day's work. The thought of any one of them being torn limb from limb by the combination of Barsali's constricting tail and powerful arms was enough to give the young knight nightmares for a week.

"You can't hold them off, and you don't need to," Carwyn explained, hoping his father would understand. "I can't call these men friends yet," he said as he turned and waved Captain Barsali and Loftur forward. "But they're allies that we can trust, and they've brought compensation for the caravan we lost, along with several soldiers to help defend the village through the winter."

"The demons brought... what?" Rhodri said, nearly dropping his reins in shock at what his son had just said. His wide eyes flicked from his son to the approaching demons, and before he realized he'd moved, he held his warhammer at the ready. Under him, his horse, Blaze, took three cautious steps backwards and turned slightly, without prompting, to present Rhodri's shield side toward the serpentine demon-knight and the claw demon who accompanied him.

"Father, no!" Carwyn cried, kneeing his own horse forward and holding both hands up high, empty of any weapon as he put himself between Sir Rhodri and his Eldritch companions. "Please, listen to me, they aren't our enemies!"

"Not our enemies?" Rhodri shouted as he tipped his visor down before retrieving the shield from his side and pointing the tip of his warhammer at the approaching men. "Look at them! If they aren't our enemies, then who is?"

"Ian Hanrahan!" Carwyn shouted back at his father. "Murderer of Baroness Caitlin, son of the usurper Aiden Hanrahan, who murdered his own brother for the throne! Those are our enemies, and they've abused our loyalty longer than I've been alive!"

Chapter 883: Under A White Banner (Part Two)

Carwyn's gambit was a desperate attempt to redirect his father's thinking, confronting the old knight with just one of the many shocking truths that Carwyn had learned since he was taken prisoner by the forces of the Vale of Mists.

His shout wasn't quiet either, and the men who had followed Sir Rhodri shuffled nervously, each one looking to his neighbors and back to the knight they'd come to rescue as they tried to figure out what exactly Sir Carwyn was talking about. Their Lord Baron had murdered the previous Baroness? When and how? And Baron Aiden had usurped the throne after murdering his brother?

None of them ever came into contact with Baron Hanrahan or his family, but they'd all heard about high and mighty members of the aristocracy who spent more time and wealth scheming against each other than they did helping their own people. A few of them even had grudges with the baron over exceptionally heavy tithes collected in years past, but they'd never thought he was the sort to murder his own kin!

"Father," Carwyn pleaded in a softer tone that was still very insistent. "I've seen the bearer of the true Hanrahan Signet," he said. "I've sworn my sword to Baron Brighton Hanrahan's heir, along with young lord Hugo Hanrahan, and to the people she has pledged her fealty to," he explained as he gestured at Captain Barsali and Loftur. "These men answer to her as well."

Behind him, Barsali and Loftur stood still, holding themselves back from what had obviously become an intense conversation. Loftur did his best to convey what was happening to the confused Captain Barsali but there were too many concepts that were completely foreign to the arena Champion from High Fen City.

A younger brother defeated his older brother to become the lord of a territory. In Barsali's mind, this should have been a very ordinary thing, but looking at the humans who seemed stunned, pale faced and even slightly ill at the news, something was clearly very wrong with this which left Barsali wondering if the younger Hanrahan had done something forbidden in order to obtain his victory, weakening their territory rather than strengthening it.

He didn't understand, but that didn't stop him from peppering Loftur with questions in an attempt to know the human he wanted to befriend better. Meanwhile, Carwyn was doing his best to explain things to his father without provoking the sort of tragedy that would only doom the village.

"I'm sorry, Father," Carwyn said as gently as he could. "But during the War of Inches, our family fought for the wrong side, while the person whom we really owed our fealty to fought on behalf of the Eldritch people of Airgead Mountain. We've been lied to, and Lord Hugo and I have only just learned the truth."

"So Baron Brighton had a daughter that we've never known about?" Sir Rhodri said, furrowing his snowy brows behind his visor as he carefully considered his son's words. He hadn't known what would cause his son to give his allegiance to the demons, but he'd suspected that his son had been beguiled by some form of demon witchcraft.

He'd never in his wildest imaginings considered that his son would confront him with news of betrayal and treachery within their liege lord's family, or that he would have sworn to serve a different branch of the Hanrahan family.

Lord Hugo Hanrahan's involvement in all of this only made matters murkier. The man was an acknowledged son of Baron Ian Hanrahan, but he was also a bastard who had only been acknowledged over fears that Ian's son, Bastian, wouldn't recover from his injuries. A bastard child of an accused usurper and the daughter of a murdered lord sounded more like a rebel uprising than people with any kind of legitimate claim.

"It doesn't matter if Baron Brighton had a daughter," Sir Rhodri said slowly. "Unless she had a son for the throne to pass to before her father died, she has no claim. And Lord Hugo doesn't have a claim either. He stands behind Bastian to inherit from Lord Ian, and by all accounts, he's barely capable of fighting."

"If this daughter of Baron Brighton had been a son instead, then such a man could contest for the throne," Sir Rhodri said confidently. "But never a woman. A lord must be able to lead his men in battle and no woman has the strength of arms to take her place on the field in the nightmare of war."

Try as he might, he couldn't understand how his son had been swayed to serve a woman who would still need to yield her claim to the throne to the first male heir with clean hands, which likely meant Bastian. His son knew this, and he understood well that a knight, and every lord above him, must be prepared to fight for their people. His son had proved how much he understood that when he fought a duel with a demon! So where exactly had he gone astray?

"That's where you're wrong, Father," Sir Carwyn said, chuckling at his father's choice of words. "You already know Dame Sybyll Hanrahan, and you've told stories about her strength in battle for years," he said. "It's just that you didn't know the name of the person underneath the armor of the Crimson Knight," he explained. "But I promise you, Father, she's far stronger than any knight I've ever fought, and soon, she'll reclaim her birthright."

"You, you're saying that the Crimson Knight is a woman?" Sir Rhodri said in disbelief. "A Hanrahan woman? Baron Brighton's daughter..." he said as his voice trailed off. "No wonder. No wonder Baron Ian would never go anywhere near the front lines once the Crimson Knight joined in the war," he breathed.

"There's more, much more to the story," Carwyn said as he kneed his horse forward, riding close enough to his father to reach out and rest a hand on the other man's arm. "Let me introduce you to my companions, and then, we can all go home. There's much, much more to discuss, and I intend to send messengers to summon a member of every family to hear the news from me tonight."

"I know it will be hard to hear," he said as he looked at the closed-off visor that stopped him from meeting his father's eyes. "It was hard for me, too. But I promise that I haven't betrayed our family or our village. So, even though our new allies are strange, can you trust me, even if you can't yet trust them?"

"Can you give us a chance to come home without bloodshed today?" Carwyn said. "Because I've seen how the fight will end," he added in a voice that was loud enough to reach the villagers who had come out to 'rescue' him. "And without someone like Lady Heila here to heal the wounded the way she healed me, I'm afraid too many of my friends would die."

Chapter 884: Not So Different

Sir Rhodri searched his son's face for several silent moments as a cloud of white steam rose from his visor in the frigid morning air.

In that face, he saw shadows of the boy who said he would grow up strong and ride to war so his father could stay home and guard the village. The same boy who had begged for stories of the bravest knights and listened solemnly at his father's knee while the elder knight explained that the bravest knights were the ones who sacrificed opportunities for personal glory in order to protect the soldiers they led and provide for the people of their villages.

Now, when he looked into his son's eyes, he saw the echoes of that young boy, striving to protect the people of his village, and turning himself into a heretic to do it.

"You understand what will happen if the village follows you?" Sir Rhodri asked. As both a father, and a knight, he felt like he had to know that his son had fully considered the consequences of what they were facing.

The moment the village opened its gates for demons, everyone within their walls would be declared a heretic. Even if Baron Ian Hanrahan never sent an army to crush them for rebelling, the Church was sure to send Inquisitors and Templars to cleanse their village of the 'stain' of peace with the demons before that stain could spread.

"I understand what will happen to the village if it doesn't," Carwyn said solemnly. "And of the two roads before us, I know which one is worse. This is Captain Barsali of Commander Tausau's Third Army," he said, gesturing to the serpentine gladiator who raised himself up high on his tail to match gazes with the pair of knights. "And this is Loftur of Commander Bassinger's First Army, who has been helping us to speak to each other while we learn each other's language."

"Captain Barsali says that he sees where Sir Carwyn's strength flows from," Lotfur said, stepping forward and repeating what the scaled gladiator had said. "The men behind you aren't warriors, but you have come with, wait," he said, stopping as he turned back to ask Barsali if he really meant what he'd said before he continued.

"He says that your hearts are filled with the will to die," Lotfur said awkwardly. "And that you know that you cannot win a battle here, yet you have come anyway. You prepare for war anyway."

"He says that if you wish it, he will fight you and give you glory in death," the bearish soldier said, looking from the proud and confident Barsali to Carwyn and over to the frightened looking group of humans who had clustered together with their axes and hammers held up high as if they feared being attacked at any moment.

"Wait!" Carwyn said quickly. "Let me explain. Some of the Eldritch, ones like Barsali who come from the other side of the mountains, would rather die in battle than of old age. He's offering to fight you because he respects you."

"You really are coming to know them, aren't you, son?" Sir Rhodri said with a chuckle as he raised his visor at last. "You think I've never known an old man who would rather ride into battle to die than waste away on his deathbed?"

He said it lightly, as if he was talking about other men, but he couldn't deny that there was a part of him who had been relieved at the idea of meeting his end in battle today. He would blaze a path to the Heavenly Shores for his family to follow, and if he couldn't reach them, at least he would have died giving his son a chance to see his own children born.

But this... this was better than a bitter struggle to the end.

"Loftur, was it?" Rhodri said as he looked at the claw demon, who seemed so much milder than the ones he'd fought in the war, as if there was no fury or hatred in his heart, even when he had come with an army at his back. "Tell your captain that I intend to hold my grandchildren before I die, and that I want to see Carwyn give me many more of them before I go."

"Father!" Carwyn cried as his cheeks heated in embarrassment. At the same time, his shoulders slumped in relief that the tense moment finally seemed to have passed, despite Barsali's bizarre offer to give his father a glorious death.

"So what is your plan, Sir Carwyn Belvin, Knight Protector of Raek Village?" Sir Rhodri asked with a broad smile on his face, speaking in the same tone he'd often used when he was testing his son about how he should govern their village. "There is a village full of people back there who are very frightened. They think they're about to be slaughtered by demons. How are you going to explain all of this to them?"

"One step at a time," Carwyn said as he looked past his father to the nervous-looking villagers who had come out with him. "You can put your weapons down!" Carwyn shouted. "No one is going to fight today, but I need your help to prepare the way for our allies to join us."

"Terrik, Bistal," the young knight continued as he waved over two of the villagers whom he knew best. Both men approached nervously with hands that were white knuckled on the hands of the mauls they carried, and neither of them was willing to come any closer than a few steps behind Sir Rhodri's horse, but even that much, coming within a dozen paces of two powerful 'demons' was already an act of extreme courage for both men.

"Yer Lordship," Terrik said as he looked hesitantly at the young knight sitting confidently astride his horse, side by side with a pair of demons who looked like they were strong enough to tear a man in two with the same ease that the blacksmith could twist hot iron. "W-what do ye need of us?"

"Go clear out Millside," Carwyn said, referring to the side of the River Belvin where the mills had been built, opposite most of the established village that existed before they expanded. "There aren't many people who built homes close to the mills, mostly, it's the mills, granaries, and storehouses over there. Captain Barsali can take his men to that side of the river for now, and we can station men on the bridges to keep anything unfortunate from happening while I explain everything to the people."

"That sounds wise," Sir Rhodri agreed with a nod. "And where will you go while they sort all of that out?"

"I'll stay here until I can lead Captain Barsali and his men across the bridge," Carwyn said, though there was a trace of reluctance in his voice. "I've given my word that I'll do everything I can to prevent bloodshed, and even though I've given my oath to shift my allegiance to Dame Sybyll, our new allies have every reason to doubt my word," he admitted uncomfortably.

"Until things are settled, I need to stay with my 'escort,'" Carwyn explained awkwardly. "I tried suggesting that I could ride into the village alone and make preparations, but..."

"But part of proving your loyalty means listening to your new liege lady's orders," Sir Rhodri said, nodding his understanding of the position his son had been placed in. "In that case," the old knight said as he turned to the towering, bearish figure of Loftur. "Tell your captain that I'll take my son's place as his hostage while he makes arrangements in the village."

"Father, I can't just..."

"Done," Loftur said, interrupting Carwyn before he'd even translated the old knight's words for the serpentine captain. "Your woman is waiting for you, isn't she? You should go to her and let your father take your place. I'll explain for you," he added with a wink as he waved at Barsali. "But he will understand. So go," Loftur said, stepping forward and giving Carwyn's horse a light slap on the rump.

"Alright," Carwyn said, taking the reins firmly as his borrowed horse danced away from the bearish soldier. "I'll make sure you don't have to wait out here in the cold for long," he promised his father

before he prodded his horse into motion, galloping toward the village gates without waiting to hear a reply.

As much as he hated leaving his father behind, he had come to know Barsali's character well enough to expect that the glory-seeking gladiator would be begging the old knight for tales of battle within minutes of Carwyn's departure. As long as his father was willing to play at being a hostage, he would be treated exceptionally well by the Eldritch.

So now that matters were settled, at least for the moment, he was finally free to race to Olwyna's side, and he wouldn't stop until he held her in his arms again.

Chapter 885: Warm Embrace

Carwyn leaned in close against his horse's neck as the pair galloped toward the opening gates of Raek Village. White steam flew from the horse's nostrils, trailing behind him only to be shredded by the flapping of his cloak in the cold wind of their passage.

Home. Finally, he was home, and for a moment, nothing mattered to him more than racing as fast as he could toward the person who meant 'home' to him more than any village or house ever would.

The heavy wooden gates of the village had barely opened wide enough for him to pass when he thundered through them, kicking up clods of frozen earth as the horse charged into the village without breaking stride.

All around him, villagers who had been making preparations for a demon attack stopped in their tracks, staring in shock at their returning lord. Some raised a cheer, and others started running behind him, but Carwyn barely noticed in his haste to reach the village square and the manor where Olwyna would be waiting.

"Eeee hee he he he he!" The horse whinnied and protested when he reined in to a sudden stop as soon as he heard its hooves ringing off the earthen pavers of the village square. Only years of experience on horseback allowed him to remain in the saddle as the horse reared up, swiping at the air with its hooves before settling down with a heavy -CLOP- -CLOP-

"Carwyn!" Olwyna's clarion cry cut through all the noise in the village square, hushing the villagers who had begun to cheer as everyone held their breath, watching the scene unfold before them.

"My love!" Carwyn shouted as he slipped from the saddle, his hands already working at the buckles of his gauntlets as he strode across the village square. A handful of rapid heartbeats later, both gauntlets clanked as they fell to the ground only a few additional heartbeats before Carwyn threw his arms around Olwynna, pulling her into a gentle embrace as if she was a piece of porcelain that he was afraid of breaking against the cold steel of his armor.

"You're home," she sobbed, staring up into her husband's soft, watery eyes. One of her hands wrapped around his waist, pulling herself close despite the cold of his armor, while the other hand reached up gently, tracing her fingers along the stubble of his jaw as though she didn't believe he was real.

"I'm home," he whispered back, reaching out with one hand to catch the edge of his cloak and wrapping it around her shoulders as he held her close, shielding her from the cold. "I'm sorry, I," he started to say, only to stop when Olwynna put a finger over his lips to silence him.

"You were brave, my sunshine," she said, reaching up with trembling fingers to brush his wind tousled hair from his eyes. "Dyfad told us all. You fought a duel with a demon so the villagers could go free."

"I, I always knew the kind of man I married," she said softly as she caressed his face. "You have always been my hero. But when they needed you, you were their hero too. I just, I just hated that... that I thought I lost you," she sobbed, pressing her head against his armored chest and wishing she could hear the comforting beat of his heart through the layers of steel and padding that kept him safe from the demon's claws and spears. "I hated that they hurt you," she cried. "I..."

"Shhh," Carwyn whispered as he gently stroked her hair. "I'm home now. Safe and sound," he said as he lowered himself slowly to his knees so he could press his ear up against her belly, listening for the slightest sound of a heartbeat while he gently stroked her belly.

"Silly," she whispered as she tousled his hair. "It's still weeks too soon to hear anything, even your mother said so," she chided him gently, though she made no move to step away.

It seemed like a quarter of the village or more had gathered in the square by now, standing silently or whispering among each other as they watched the tender moment between their lord and lady, but no one made the slightest move to disturb the couple.

"He's so big already," Carwyn marveled, feeling as if his wife's belly had doubled in size while he was gone, even though the truth was that her belly hadn't grown that much in such a short period of time. "Surely he's close to being born," he said as he gently stroked her belly, feeling the faint kick against his hand.

"He has to grow up big and strong to be a hero like his father," Olwyna said, looking down at her husband's handsome, rugged features through misty eyes as she imagined their child growing up to be a brave, heroic knight who could still hold a woman with soft, gentle hands the way Carwyn held her.

"But I know my body well, husband," she chided gently. "Your heir is still more than two moons away, no matter how much I wish he would come sooner. Trust women in this," she added as she playfully tapped his brow with the tip of a finger. "Our little hero still needs time to grow."

"I love you, my little hero," Carwyn whispered to the child within Olwyna's belly. "I came back for you and your mother, and I promise, as long as there's strength in my body and breath in my chest, I'll always come back for you."

"We know you will," Olwyna said softly as she felt a slight kick from the child in her womb, almost as if the child in her belly could hear his father's promise.

Now that he was here, kneeling before her, she found herself resting a hand on cold steel of the pauldron that protected his shoulder just to keep herself upright as relief washed over her, bringing with it a wave of fatigue she'd been pushing off ever since her husband was captured.

"Olwyna!" Carywn said sharply when he realized she was tottering on her feet. Moving slowly while she leaned on him, he wrapped an arm around her and stood, supporting her as he did and looking out over the crowd until he spotted the familiar figure of his mother, slowly making her way over from the direction of the village's small temple.

"Mother," the young knight called. "Clear a path for her, and clear a path to the manor," he shouted. "Let me help her inside. You shouldn't be out here in the cold, my love," he chided gently as his mother emerged from the crowd.

She clearly wanted to embrace her son, but seeing the subtle shake of his head, she took her position on the other side of Olwyna to help the young woman back into their home. There were dozens of

questions on her lips that she wanted to ask as they helped the pregnant woman up the steps of the family manor, but looking around and not seeing a second armored figure, she asked only one.

"Carwyn," the snow-haired and stoop-shouldered woman asked once they'd helped Olwynna into a plush, overstuffed chair. "Where is your father?"

"He's waiting with the rest of my men outside the village," Carwyn said carefully. "Mother," he said as he took her slender, almost bony hands in his own. "I need you to trust me right now. I've told Father a little bit, but there's so much more you need to know in order to understand," he said as he glanced between the worried eyes of the two women who mattered most in his life.

"I need to clear out Millside for our guests," the young knight said carefully. "We're going to need their protection to get through the winter. And by winter's end... they may even be our friends."

Chapter 886: Herding Cats

On the face of it, what Carwyn needed to do was simple. There were three large mills on the far side of the River Belvin, along with half a dozen storehouses and just as many granaries, plus twenty or so shops and homes that had been built in the past few years.

Most of those homes belonged to the newcomers who had come to Raek Village because of the land that Carwyn promised them, and a few of those newcomers were reluctant to cede the far side of the river to an occupying demon army.

"I understand, yer lordship," Kraki, the Master Brewer, said as he stubbornly folded his arms across his considerable bulk. "Ye want ta' clear us out ta' make space fer tha demons ta' camp. But yer lordship, a man still has a right ta' defend 'is home. How can I jus' roll over an' let demons go rummaging in my cellars or drinkin' up my best brews?"

"Master Kraki," Carwyn said, barely able to keep from pulling his hair out in frustration. "The Eldritch won't touch your home, or your shop, or drink your ale. They just need to camp in the fields near the wall where the sheep and cattle graze. They won't come within a hundred paces of your home!"

"Ye say that, yer lordship," the stubborn brewer argued. "But soldiers is soldiers, isn't they? An' demon soldiers is likely worse! Like as not, they'll slaughter tha' livestock ta' sacrifice 'em ta' their heathen gods an' use my ale ta' drink themselves drunk in their pagan rites!"

"No, they will not!" Carwyn insisted with a face that grew darker by the moment as his patience waned. He wanted to be with Olwyna right now, and he wanted his father to join them almost as badly, just to put his mother's mind at ease, but he couldn't accomplish either until he could clear out a space for the Eldritch to camp.

"But let's say, just for a moment, let's say they wanted to do what you said," the young knight said in a tone that revealed just how frayed his patience was. "I fought Barsali in full armor, with a warhorse under me, a lance, a flail, and a shield, and I've trained my whole life to fight the Eldritch and other armored knights. Just one fight and he nearly tore me limb from limb," Carwyn said as his tone grew menacing.

"Do you know what it sounds like when your arm is pulled out of its socket?" Carwyn asked as he leaned close to the barrel-shaped man and poked him in the chest. "Can you imagine what it would be like to have his tail wrapped around you, crushing you like a snake crushes a mouse until your eyes bulge out of your head and your blood pours from your ears?"

"If the Eldritch are really going to raid your home to get at your ale, do you really think you can put up a better fight than I did?" Carwyn asked as he stared at the brewer who had gone pale-faced with sweat beading on his brow. "Wouldn't it be safer to wait things out as my guest in the manor? I'll have soldiers at the bridges to keep our villagers and the Eldritch apart so you'll be safe across the river," he suggested.

"But, but this is all I have!" Kraki protested. "Yer lordship, ye promised me a new life if I gave up workin' fer me master in Lothian City an' came out here ta' teach my trade an' now ye want to snatch away what I've built!"

"No, no, I don't want to take anything away from you, Master Kraki," Carwyn said as calmly as he could. "I've been a guest in their home for weeks now. I know these men. They aren't what you think they are. But how about this," he said as he tried another approach. "If you'll come across the river, just until after the village gathering tonight, I'll buy up all of your ale that's ready to drink."

"I know that's not everything!" Carwyn said when he saw a flicker of mercantile ambition in the heavyset man's eyes. "I know your best brews need to age till spring at least, and if the Eldritch destroy them, then I promise to pay for whatever they damage. But this way, even if nothing happens, you still make out well, don't you?"

It took another ten minutes of pleading, threatening and bargaining before the brewer finally agreed to pack up and head across the river, and Carwyn had to promise that he would exempt Master Kraki from tithes for five years if he had to rebuild his business because of this, but in the end, the portly merchant took a handful of silver from Carwyn and hurried across the bridge along with the other villages leaving Millside.

Master Kraki wasn't alone in his protests, and things nearly became violent when seven of the men who tended to the mills and granaries refused to leave for fear that the village's food supply would be poisoned by the 'demons' who would be camped just a stone's throw away from half a harvest's worth of grain.

"I've been eating with these men for two days," Carwyn reassured them. "And with the rest of the Eldritch for nearly two weeks now. The last thing you need to worry about is that they'd poison your food," he said, though he winced slightly as he said it.

Carwyn had heard about Sir Ollie poisoning the food given to Lord Hugo and Sir Rain's men, but he firmly reminded himself that Sir Ollie had done so to prevent violence instead of capturing their prisoners more forcefully. The end result would have been the same, but the method was selected as a kindness to the men they took prisoner.

"Captain Barsali is an honorable Champion among the Eldritch," Carwyn insisted. "He would be horribly offended at the notion that he couldn't defeat an opponent without resorting to poisons in our food. Trust me," he said with a wry smile. "You have more to fear from me and my men if you don't get moving across the river than you have to fear from him," he said in a tone that contained both humor and enough sternness that the millers eventually relented.

By the time the Carwyn had cleared out Millside and the Eldritch finally caravan trundled through the gates, the day was already growing darker, and the strange weather had grown even colder when the heavy blanket of gray clouds drifted south and east, revealing an icy blue sky just beginning to darken.

For a moment, Carwyn thought he would have an hour or so of peace to spend with his family before they met with the villagers, but that feeling fled as soon as he saw Loftur supporting his father as the old man gingerly dismounted from his horse. At the same time, Carwyn noticed Barsali was moving carefully and resting one hand on his father's saddle as if to steady himself while they passed through the village gates.

"Father! What happened?" Carwyn asked as he pushed his way through the crowd to reach the men at the head of the caravan.

Chapter 887: Warrior Bonding

More than a hundred villagers had gathered at the gates, staring at the Eldritch caravan with a mixture of fearful and curious faces as most of them were seeing 'demons' in the flesh for the very first time. Others, however, spotted a familiar figure at the head of the caravan, one they had last seen just weeks ago when Sir Carwyn faced him in single combat.

"There it is! That's tha' one Sir Carwyn fought fer us," one man exclaimed, pointing a shaking, trembling finger at Barsali. "It's tha Demon Knight!"

"Holy Lord of Light," a woman nearby whispered as she fell to her knees at the sight of the imposing, serpentine figure. "Forgive me for doubting that such horrors were real. You have long protected us from evil, please do not forsake us now..."

"Papa, papa, look! It's a bear wearin' clothes like people," a small, childish voice cried as a young boy, little more than six years old, jumped up and down excitedly as if he was seeing jesters in costume at a summer festival.

"Get back here," another parent shouted as they snatched their young child who was attempting to rush out to hug the 'big fluffy bear-person.' "That's not a bear, it's a demon! You stay away from it, or it might eat you!"

Unfortunately, not everyone had responses to their first sight of the Eldritch people as the few children who were present. A few of the young men looked like they had brought stones to throw, but Carwyn's soldiers had formed a line to keep the villagers from getting too close to their Eldritch guests. Anyone who looked like they might cause trouble was quickly 'reminded,' sometimes with a mailed fist, that Carwyn would harshly punish anyone who made a move against their new allies.

"Father, what happened to you?" Carwyn repeated when he reached the old knight's side and took in the slight hesitation in his step and the way he favored his left leg as if it hurt to put much weight on.

"Nothing you need to worry about, son," Sir Rhodri said as he pulled off his helm and lowered his cowl of mail. "I'm just not as quick on my feet as I used to be," he chuckled as he pointed an accusing finger at

Barsali. "I forgot about this one's sneaky tail, and he taught me a valuable lesson," he said with a wide smile on his face and a twinkle in his eyes.

"Captain Barsali says that he's sorry," Loftur helpfully translated when the serpentine warrior took off his plumed helm and turned it to the side to point to a fresh dent. "But he was caught off guard by your father's blow, and he struck out harder than he meant to without realizing it."

"Father!" Carwyn cried, turning to look at the old knight with a terrified look on his face. "You attacked him?"

"No, no, not like that," Rhodri said as he gestured for his son to lead the way so they could move on from the village gates. "While we were waiting, your friend Barsali asked for a lesson in how knights fight other men in heavy armor. We just got a bit... enthusiastic at one point."

In truth, Barsali had asked for more than a lesson in how knights fought. The conversation between Barsali and Rhodri had taken more than an hour, with Loftur explaining many things that went beyond the meanings of words to both men as they spoke, but in the end, it boiled down to a request that Rhodri couldn't deny.

"Your son fought with his entire body and spirit," Barsali said. "He is a Champion who cannot yield because his heart is filled with conviction. He loves his family and his people, and he fought as one man against ten to protect his own soldiers. You are his father. You taught him these things. Please, teach me in the way you taught him," he asked, bowing deeply to the old knight.

"Why do you want to learn from me?" Rhodri asked, furrowing his white, bushy brows at the serpentine warrior. "You defeated my son. You don't need to learn from an old man in order to defeat people like me."

"I don't want to defeat him," Barsali explained. "I want to fight beside him. I want him to join me on the sands of the arena if I go home, and I want to fight beside him in this war to protect the people who give him so much strength. For that, I need help to understand him, or how can I be his friend in battle?"

Phrased that way, it was a request that Sir Rhodri couldn't refuse. He might not have understood the words until Loftur translated them, but he could hear the sincere emotion in the serpentine warrior's voice when he spoke.

There were many men who Sir Rhodri thought of as closer than brothers after fighting with them through the War of Inches, and to this day, there were a few of them that he would ride halfway across the march to defend if they called on him in time of need. To hear an Eldritch warrior desire the same kind of relationship with his son shifted the old knight's view of the 'demons' more than he'd ever imagined would be possible in such a brief span of time.

The lesson he gave had grown larger and larger in scope as more and more people wanted to learn from the venerable knight who had shaped one of the few humans who wasn't a witch or a vampire that the Eldritch warriors had come to truly respect and even admire, and by the time they returned, Sir Rhodri had given lessons to almost every soldier who accompanied his son on their journey home.

"Your father is a cunning warrior," Loftur added as he continued to support the old knight while they guided the caravan across the river. "I am half his age, stronger and taller, and I could not best him even once."

"Give it time," Sir Rhodri said in a conciliatory tone as he patted the bearish translator on the shoulder. "A warhammer is four weapons in one, head, spike, butt, and haft. You focus only on the first, and the rest will do you in. Once you learn to see all the threats, you'll overwhelm an old man like me in no time."

The more they talked, the more Carwyn realized that he'd been wrong to worry about his father accepting the Eldritch. It seemed like the old knight had found his own way of getting to know their new allies, and once they found a bit of common ground, the differences fell away.

Now, he only hoped that the rest of the village could learn from his father's example, particularly when Acolyte Holm joined the village meeting tonight as a representative of the Church...

Chapter 888: A Humble Servant (Part One)

As darkness fell over Raek Village, Acolyte Holm made his way through the crowds of common folk with a calm, steady pace that allowed the crowd to part around him rather than forcing his way through.

His pure white robes were trimmed with only the slightest bit of gold at the stiff collar, reflecting his low status within the Church as a whole. No matter how devout he thought himself to be, Holm had never

managed more than a minor miracle of light, and the Church had long ago consigned him to the very edge of the frontier in a village too small and too poor to demand a real Priest.

At first, he'd taken his assignment to Raek as a punishment little different from exile, but over the years he'd been here, he came to see the unique advantages of being in a village this small. In Lothian City, he had been one of more than a hundred acolytes in the great temple. He walked very small, kept his lips tightly sealed, and only offered up an opinion when it was asked for.

Out here, however, he wasn't 'just an acolyte,' he was the direct representative of the Church and the Holy Lord of Light. There was no one here who could command him, and when his predecessor returned to Lothian City to retire more than a decade ago, Holm had become one of Sir Rhodri's advisors, wielding considerable power within the village.

Now, he moved with a steady, stately pace, his hands clasped behind his back in the manner of Church officials, chin raised to project authority despite his modest stature. The crowd instinctively parted before his white robes, some bowing their heads respectfully while others merely stepped aside with uncomfortable shuffles. His dull brown hair, increasingly streaked with gray, caught the flickering torchlight as he surveyed the packed hall with narrowed eyes, listening to the whispers of the common folk as they waited for their lord to address them.

"Did you hear?" One villager whispered to another. "Sir Carwyn bought up all of Master Kraki's ale to give it to the demons! We're not going to have a drop of it to drink all winter!"

"Lucky bastard," the villager next to him cursed. "I hear Sir Carwyn paid him in gold instead of silver. I'll be drinking Myra's home brew this winter," he groused, thinking of his wife's ale that always tasted more of herbs than alcohol. "But if that fat brewer thinks he can get gold for selling to demons instead of tin snips and silver from us then I'll be stuck with Myra's brew long after!"

It would be impossible to host the entire village within the great hall, but each household had sent a representative to listen to Sir Carwyn explain why he'd brought demons within the walls of the village just before dark, going so far as to evict people from their homes in order to make way for the evil creatures, and more than a hundred people packed in to a hall that rarely hosted more than thirty or forty.

As Acolyte Holm worked his way forward through the crowd, there were even more concerning whispers drifting through the tightly packed great hall.

"They say that Sir Rhodri dueled the Demon Knight and fought him to a draw," a lantern jawed man who smelled of straw and horses said. "They even say that the demons came here to learn how to fight from Sir Rhodri."

"I saw it when they came through the gates," a young man, barely old enough to need to shave the stubble from his jaw every morning piped in. "The Demon Knight was showing off the dent in his helm from Sir Rhodri's hammer. Sir Rhodri could have killed him if he wanted to, but he didn't!"

The Acolyte's faintly lined eyes narrowed and his lips tightened when he heard about the former lord of their village sparing the life of a powerful demon that he clearly could have slain if he'd been willing to. He'd hoped that Sir Rhodri, as a man who earned glory slaying demons in the War of Inches, would be an ally he could count on in the confrontation to come, but he feared that even a knight covered in many years of glory wasn't immune to the corrupting influence of the demons.

Holm had gone to see the demons when they entered the village and he'd seen the horror of them with his own eyes. An insidious serpent demon posed as a knight to pervert the great respect and devotion the people held toward the guardians the Holy Lord of Light had put in place to protect their people from the dangers of the world was a threat unlike any the Acolyte had ever prepared to face.

Already, he had seen the old master of the village, Sir Rhodri, giving way to the 'Demon Knight', treating it like a brother in arms and giving it lessons in fighting humans! Clearly, the serpent was so insidious that it had poisoned the heart of Sir Carwyn's father within a handful of hours.

But compared to the Demon Knight, Acolyte Holm was even more concerned about the claw demon who had somehow made himself appear 'cuddly' and soft in order to appeal to the children of the village. It had even gone so far as to learn the king's common tongue in order to corrupt the youth who were too innocent to understand the deceit in the words that spilled from its muzzle.

Now, Holm had come to the village gathering, prepared to speak out with fiery words to wake the village from the heretical spell that their leaders had fallen under. He might only be an acolyte without the ability to summon holy flames or heal wounds like a true priest, but here in Raek Village, he was the true representative of the Holy Lord of Light. The people would have to listen to him when he warned them of the evils of consorting with demons.

The hot words died on his lips, however, when he reached the front of the great hall where a seat should be waiting for him only to find all of the chairs occupied, and the one that should have been his, sitting directly beside Sir Carwyn, was occupied by the Demon Knight, while the claw demon hovered protectively behind the knights like a puppet master, ready to tug at heartstrings with its sharpened claws.

The other chairs were occupied by familiar figures, from the white haired Sir Rhodri who took a seat next to Sir Carwyn's heavily pregnant wife to the weathered figure of the village purser, Dyfad who had barely escaped death at the hands of the demons when they captured Sir Carwyn, each of the men who were present were vital to managing the affairs of the village.

"Where is my seat?" Acolyte Holm said in genuine surprise as he realized there wasn't a single empty chair at the head of the great hall. He hadn't just been moved from his position closest to Sir Carwyn, it seemed like he'd been replaced entirely by the Demon Knight.

"It can't be that you're denying the Holy Lord of Light a place in the affairs of the village," Holm said as he narrowed his eyes at the young knight who had stood to greet him. "Can it, Sir Carwyn?"

Chapter 889: A Humble Servant (Part Two)

"Acolyte Holm," Sir Carwyn said as he gave the white robed man an appraising look. This was a moment that he'd been dreading ever since he made up his mind to accept Lady Ashlynn's offer to bring his village under Dame Sybyll's banner, and by extension, under the rule of the Vale of Mists.

"I meant to speak with you before we began," he began apologetically. Looking at the acolyte's face, he realized that it had been a mistake to focus all of his attention on clearing out Millside for their Eldritch guests without making the time to speak to Holm privately before this gathering. He'd intended to, but by the time the Eldritch were finally settled, most of the villagers had already gathered, and he'd thought that it was too late to track down the Church's representative for even a brief conversation.

"I'm sure you'll have many thoughts about the news I intend to share today," Sir Carwyn said diplomatically. "But please, hold back your words until the gathering has ended."

"Sir Carwyn," the acolyte said stiffly, refusing to offer even the smallest of bows to such a clearly corrupted knight who had forsaken his vows and virtues. "Now is a time when the people will have many questions. They should be able to receive answers from the Church that will support their faith and ensure that they are able to meet their struggle in a moment as challenging as this."

"No," Carwyn said flatly. "This isn't a gathering of your faithful, it's a gathering of my villagers," the young knight said, drawing a sharp line between the Church's authority and his own. "If you want to console the faithful after this, I will not stop you from speaking from your temple, but even then, you must speak with me first."

"I speak for the Holy Lord of Light and His Church, Sir Carwyn," Holm said, drawing himself up to his full height and attempting to project the majesty of his office the way the priests of Lothian City seemed to do so easily. "The Holy Lord of Light's words will not change because you wish them to," he said, speaking loudly enough that the villagers around him went quiet in order to hear what he had to say.

"Every man is called by the Light to struggle toward the Heavenly Shores, Sir Carwyn," the acolyte said, gaining momentum as if he were speaking from the pulpit of his temple. "But the people need a guiding light to reach their destination, or they may struggle in vain, led astray by the temptations of relief from struggle, peace, and compromise with heretics and the unholy!"

Holm's words washed over the crowd like a bucket of cold water, shocking everyone with a chill that went straight to their hearts and stilled their tongues. Some even knelt on the spot, clasping their hands in prayer as they waited to hear the words of the Holy Lord of Light in this moment of profound crisis.

The villagers closest to Acolyte Holm watched spittle fly from his lips as his voice rose, his normally pale complexion now turning red with righteous fury. His hands shook as he gestured, and sweat beaded on his forehead that had nothing to do with the heat of so many bodies packed into the hall or the flames crackling in the hearth.

The people closest to the acolyte could see the tremor in his jaw and the way his fingers curled into claws when he pointed accusingly at Sir Carwyn before he rounded on the crowd. They stepped backward several paces, not from any kind of reverence or respect for the Church he represented, but from the unsettling intensity radiating from the normally reserved acolyte, leaving him isolated in a growing circle of empty space.

"We stand at the precipice of the abyss!" Holm said, half speaking to the crowd and half spitting his words at Sir Carwyn. "Demons have come into our very halls! They have expelled our good and godly neighbors from their homes, and they have corrupted the hearts of the knights who swore to protect our village from darkness and evil."

"People of Raek," Holm pleaded, striding forward and turning his full attention to the crowd of his fellow villagers. "Do not be deceived! This 'Demon Knight' is no knight of virtue! It dresses up like a knight, like a charlatan seeking to separate you from your hard-earned coin, only this demon is trying to separate you from your rightful place on the Heavenly Shores where your loved ones wait for you to join them!"

The mention of the Heavenly Shores struck people differently throughout the hall. An old widower near the back clutched at the delicate necklace around his neck, holding tight to the reminder of his late wife and the promise that they would be reunited one day soon, now that their sons were grown and could look after themselves.

But beside him, a younger farmer frowned and crossed his arms as the useless acolyte blustered before the crowd. He'd lost an infant son and a young daughter to fever despite constant prayer, and his faith died along with his children when Acolyte Holm told him that it was part of his 'struggle' to persist in working his farm and making his tithes despite the grief that gnawed at his heart.

Some people in the crowd nodded along with Holm's words, but others exchanged meaningful glances, remembering how the 'demons' had let the farmers go unscathed as an act of mercy during their raid on the caravan. The demons hadn't even killed their lord at the end of the battle, instead, they brought him home safely, while the Church had offered only empty platitudes that they must learn from Carwyn's example and struggle against adversity during the dark weeks of his absence.

"Remember the fate that waits for those who embrace heresy and consort with demons," Holm said, turning back to face Sir Carwyn and pointing an accusing finger at him. "The Inquisition will come for those who spread venomous lies, and they will be consumed by the Holy Lord of Light's purifying flames. In the next life, they will be born to destitution and poxes with bodies twisted by deformity and no hope of reaching the heavenly shores at the end of a hundred lives of bitter struggle," he shouted.

"I am only a humble servant of the Holy Lord of Light," Holm said, trembling as his chest rose and fell with deep breaths to recover from delivering his fiery condemnation. But even as his chest heaved to draw breath, his heart soared, pounding with righteous fury and rising on the winds of whispered prayers from the most faithful in the crowd.

He could feel the people rallying to his words as he took control of the moment, doing what he had been called to do from his youngest years. Finally, he thought. Finally, he would stand above everyone else in the village, guiding them to the Heavenly Shores by throwing off the rule of corrupted knights who betrayed them by consorting with demons.

Even a minor acolyte like Holm knew that a Holy War was coming, and when it arrived, he would stand out proudly as one who had resisted the demons, earning the recognition and rewards that had been denied him for so many years, and it all started now, with this moment of righteous defiance.

"Are you done?" Sir Carwyn said in a tone that should never come from a young knight toward any member of the church, much less one who was twenty years his senior. But when Carwyn spoke, he spoke as if he were a disappointed parent rebuking a child.

He'd only been gone for a few weeks, but in that time, the young knight had seen his simplistic view of the world and the conflicts that defined it shattered again and again. He'd been healed by a witch and found that the vampire whom everyone feared as the Crimson Knight was the survivor of betrayal and ambition.

The people the Church told him were evil had shown him what it really meant to struggle against injustice and murderous ambition. He'd seen good men like Sir Ollie building communities out of the ruins left behind by Owain Lothian and Liam Dunn's raids, and he'd seen a glimpse the vision Lady Ashlynn had for a world where they didn't have to war on each other, served up on a plate of his wife's pickled radishes and Master Georg's artful, Eldritch cooking.

Compared to what he'd seen and learned these past few weeks, Acolyte Holm seemed... small. And petty, preying on the fears of the villagers who hadn't yet learned the truths about the world that he had, so he treated Holm like the small figure he was.

"If you're done, then leave this hall and in the morning, leave my village," Carwyn commanded, shocking everyone in the hall and stilling the tongues of the villagers who had knelt to pray as if they were afraid that Carwyn would order them to leave as well.

"I'm done seeing my people misled by 'charlatans'," Carwyn said darkly, throwing the acolyte's own words back at him. "So leave, and never show your face in this village again!"

Chapter 890: Last Resort (Part One)

The rebuke stung like a slap across the cheek, and it was the first time that the young knight had ever refused to yield to the power of the church in the entire time that Acolyte Holm had known him. For a moment, the acolyte stood there stunned, as if he couldn't believe the words he'd heard.

"Excuse me?" Holm said as he glared at the young upstart who evidently thought he had the authority to exile the chosen representative of the Holy Lord of Light. "Sir Rhodri," the acolyte said as he turned to the village's former lord. "Did I hear correctly? Does your son believe that he can cast the Church and the Holy Lord of Light out of this village to give it over to the demons?"

"Don't twist words, Acolyte Holm," Sir Rhodri said, lowering his snowy brows at the Acolyte who was clearly trying to stir the pot before the crowd. "My son is the lord of this village, and he said he's through with charlatans misleading his people. If you think that applies to the whole of the Church of the Holy Lord of Light instead of just yourself, then that's a declaration you've made, not one that he has."

By now, the crowd had gone deadly quiet, and several people were all but holding their breath as they watched the conflict unfold. No matter whether a person supported Acolyte Holm and the Church or the Belvins and their rulership of Raek Village, it was clear that the two were rapidly becoming irreconcilable enemies. At this point, no matter who won the confrontation, the consequences for the villagers would be dire.

"The Church is welcome to send a new Acolyte or a proper Priest to serve the people here," Carwyn said carefully as he surveyed the villagers in the crowd. By his estimate, nearly one man in five seemed to lean favorably in the direction of Acolyte Holm, and nearly twice as many seemed intensely uncomfortable at the notion that Carwyn was casting out the Church entirely.

Carwyn hadn't wanted to make this a confrontation about faith until he'd explained several other things to the villagers. Once he'd explained the coming conflict and how their village would be kept safe, and how their Eldritch neighbors would help them prosper, it would be much easier to handle the few people who clung to their faith to resist joining forces with Dame Sybyll and Lady Ashlynn. But now, he had to do something to reassure the most devout among the faithful of his village, or all of this would spiral out of control.

"I doubt the Church in Lothian City or even in the Holy City has a Priest to send who can accept our Eldritch allies and neighbors," Carwyn continued with a wry smile as he spread his arms helplessly. "So if the Church cannot provide for us, then I'll write to Lady Nyrielle in the Vale of Mists and ask if High Inquisitor Ignatious will be kind enough to visit our village at least once a month until someone suitable can be found to take the acolyte's place."

Invoking the name of Inquisitor Ignatious was one of the strategies that Lord General Thane had recommended if things went poorly with the Church in Raek Village. It was something that Carwyn had hoped to avoid because Thane had made it clear that someone in the village would need to be willing to offer up blood for the vampire Inquisitor every time he visited, but bringing it up gave the young knight

the ability to make it clear that his issue was with Acolyte Holm and not the Church or the faith of his villagers.

In time, Carwyn didn't know what would happen to his people's faith. The Church's teachings were littered with too many lies about the Eldritch and Witches to put the same kind of faith in the rest of their teachings. At the same time, even Carwyn didn't want to let go his deep, abiding belief in the Heavenly Shores and that a man should struggle to do the best that he could in this life before he passed on to the next.

"High, High Inquisitor?" Holm said as he felt his world twist sideways as if someone had pulled a rug out from under his feet, while his stomach plummeted all the way to his knees. "H-how is there a High Inquisitor in the Vale of Mists? It isn't possible! No Inquisitor could survive the clutches of the Demon Lady of the Vale!"

For Holm, it was as though he had been pulled back in time to the days after the War of Inches ended. The priests and acolytes who had distinguished themselves during the war were all coming home, and though many had died, many new stars were ready to take their place among the ranks of his betters.

Worse than the returning heroes, however, were the returning acolytes who still had 'potential' and would become priests one day. Men who had learned to perform minor miracles in the healing tents on the battlefield or who actually stood in battle against a demon and called upon the flames of the Holy Lord of Light.

The church wanted to give Holm's position in Lothian Temple to such men, so he was sent to the furthest village at the western edge of the frontier, a place so small and unpromising that only an acolyte was needed to preside over the temple there. A tiny, unimportant acolyte. One that an upstart knight thought he could easily trample beneath the feet of his horse and exile from his village.

Blazing hot fury simmered in Holm's chest as he realized that Sir Carwyn would never do this to a full Priest. He would never do it to an Inquisitor or a Templar either. He proved it when he said that he would turn to some mythic 'High Inquisitor' in the Vale of Mists!

"It doesn't matter how he's there," Carwyn said sharply, pulling Holm's attention back to the present as the knight's patience with the aging acolyte reached its end. "I will explain everything to the villagers here, but you are no longer welcome among us."

"I told you to leave, Acolyte Holm," Carwyn said as he placed a hand on the hilt of the dagger at his waist. "I expect you to exit the great hall immediately, or you will be removed by force," he said with a nod toward two of the soldiers who stood guard over the gathering.

As soon as the guards started to move, Holm's eyes narrowed and his hands clenched into fists as he realized he was all but out of options. He could feel it, there were many in the crowd who were with him, and some were already whispering their doubts about a 'High Inquisitor' in the Vale of Mists who would come to visit their village.

If the Inquisition came, it would come with Templars and Holy Fire to cleanse the heresy of cooperation and collaboration with demons. There could be no compromise with evil, but it was clear that if the people were truly going to understand that, then they needed a demonstration.

They needed to see the power of the Holy Lord of Light to repel the demons and to purge evil from among them, or they would never rally behind him to attack the demons across the river and take back their village.

Thankfully, Holm had known he might need to take dramatic action against the demons if he was going to convince the people to rise up against a knight they adored so much, and he'd come prepared to make just such a demonstration...