

# The Vampire 931

## Chapter 931: Dame Sybyll Issues A Challenge

"Little brother, I think you made them jealous," Heila teased as she watched a golden glow rising from behind the walls of Hanrahan town. "Listen to how many of them are singing just to light up the night like you did."

"It's still not my own effort," Hauke said with a horn that was tinged lavender with embarrassment. "Without the sword..."

"The sword is just a tool, no different from my Severing Blade or Snow Fang," Heila interrupted before the young Frost Walker could diminish his accomplishment. "We're standing in a field of snow that represents your effort, under a sky lit by your effort," she reminded him. "Without you, everything we are about to do would be harder and more people would die. So don't pretend that it was the sword that did all this. You did it, and we all thank you for it."

"She's right, lad," Sybyll said with a surprisingly gentle smile on her crimson lips. "Once this is over, I owe ye' a pint of me finest ale. No, yer too big fer a pint," she corrected as she looked at the young Frost Walker's tall, sturdy figure. "Two pints, an' I won'a hear a word of refusal from ye."

"But fer now, we have work ta' do," she said as she turned to Ipiktok, giving him a simple signal as she strode forward to stand in full view of the human archers on the wall.

-PFFREEEEEEEEEEET-

-PFFREEEEEEEEEEET-

-PFFREEEEEEEEEEET-

Ipiktok and his men let out three, sharp trumpet blasts that chilled the heart of every human soldier, whether they were atop the walls, sheltered within the gatehouse, or standing in ranks beyond the gates awaiting the 'demon's' attack. Hands tightened unconsciously on weapons, and a few people even took one or two steps back before the hands of their neighbors caught them, firmly holding them in their positions to face the terror beyond the walls.

"Ian Hanrahan!" Sybyll bellowed in a voice so loud that it echoed off the city walls and carried all the way to Hanrahan Keep, where the imprisoned baron jumped in surprise at hearing a woman shouting his name.

"Get yer murderous arse out here an' face me! I'll not have tha' son o' that murderin' usurper Aiden sittin' on me throne an' pillagin' from me people one night longer," she yelled, allowing the power that filled her voice to spread her words across the entire town.

"So come! Prove yer lord enough ta' fight fer yer throne, cousin!" Sybyll shouted, pouring out all of the grievances in her heart as she yelled at the stone walls of the distant keep. "Ye were brave enough ta' murder me mother, Caitlin, weren't ye? Ye wanted ta' kill me then, didn'a ye? So come on then! Come out from yer hidin' an' face yer cousin Sybyll."

For several moments, no one in the Eldritch army moved as they waited for a response, any kind of response, from the town. The sound of prayers sung in homes of ordinary people had quieted, though it hadn't stopped entirely. Many people, however, had gone quiet so they could listen, waiting for the strangely familiar voice to speak again.

"She sounds like me neighbor Yenfer," one man who had taken shelter from the snow in a pub said to the half-drunk man sitting next to him. "I swear, I've heard tha' voice b'fore."

"Sure ye' have," the man next to him said, blinking in confusion as he looked off in the direction of the west gate. "Yer neighbor's a witch what dances wit' tha' demons under tha' green skies..."

In a certain quarter of the city, a group of working women was even more struck by the familiarity of the voice that called their baron a murderer.

"Don't she sound a bit like Sista' Red?" one of the older women working at the Slow Flame brothel said as she looked at the gathering of women who had decided to bar the doors of their business rather than accommodate the sort of men who came looking for the comfort of a woman's touch on a night like tonight.

"Tha' one what visits in tha' winter?" another woman said as she imagined the figure of the crimson-haired woman with the perfect, pale skin who asked after customers who had been rough with the girls.

She never stayed with them for long, but the men she 'entertained' had a way of either turning into much more respectful customers or going missing within a few days of their night with 'Sister Red.'

"A bit, I guess," a third woman said, smiling as she recalled the day the red-haired woman had 'convinced' the previous owner of the brothel to sell his business to the women who worked for him before he fled the town in spring to do 'more respectable business' in Lothian City. "But ye don't think it's really her... Do ye?"

Inside Hanrahan Keep, the baron himself had an entirely different reaction as his face drained of color and his knees shook so badly that he had to sit down in one of the plush, overstuffed chairs near the hearth that didn't seem to provide any warmth to the suddenly shaking baron.

"Father?" Bastian asked, setting down the cup of fine wine he'd been enjoying since it didn't seem like Lord Loman would be partaking of any of the fine refreshments they'd stocked the guest rooms with. "What nonsense is this witch spouting?"

"Witch," Ian said slowly through lips that had almost forgotten how to form words as his mind struggled with what he'd heard. "Yes, yes, that must be it, a witch... the mad woman from all those years ago went off and turned into a witch... No wonder, no wonder," he muttered as he pushed himself up from the chair and began to pace around the room, though his eyes seemed like they were focusing on something in the distant past as he walked, and his fingers were busy counting off the years.

"No wonder the Crimson Knight sent such a message," Ian said with increasing conviction as the dates all seemed to line up. "It's all that mad woman's fault!"

"The Crimson Knight sent you a message?" Bastian asked in confusion. For years, Bastian had known better than to mention the legendary demon-knight in the presence of his father. While the common folk told countless tales of the unbeatable monster who could cleave through a man's armor and shield in a single swing of his ax, just mentioning the man in Ian Hanrahan's presence was enough to provoke a tongue-lashing that dripped with venom and denials of the knight's supposed powers.

Only now, the Crimson Knight was outside their gates, and his father looked more terrified by the moment. Moreover, all of the boasts that he'd made about how easily the Crimson Knight would be slain if he ever approached their home had melted away like snow before the hearth, leaving behind a baron who looked like he was staring into his own grave.

"Father, what is happening here?"

#### Chapter 932: Ian Hanrahan's Response

"It was years ago, when you were just a lad," Ian said as he began searching about the room for anything that he could use as a sack to carry supplies. A moment later, he pulled a dressing tunic from the wardrobe and tossed it on a small table before dumping the bowls of nuts, cheeses, dried fruits and other refreshments that had been prepared for Loman's visit onto the fabric of the tunic.

"During the War of Inches, the Crimson Knight left Sir Ryt Blewett badly wounded, but clinging to life so he could deliver a message to me," Ian said as he gathered up the corners of the tunic and tied them together to form a simple bundle that he tossed to his son before returning to the wardrobe for a warm cloak and anything else that might be useful when they made their escape.

"He said that Hanrahan would fall to him one day so its rightful heir could claim the throne," Ian explained to his wide-eyed son. "Shut your mouth boy, you'll catch flies," he scolded before he continued his explanation. "I thought I'd settled this nonsense years before, but I missed the girl," he rambled. "Now she's here, like a ghost that's haunting me and she brought that damn knight with her!"

"Father, I don't understand," Bastian said as he tried to conceal the hurt in his heart, focusing instead on learning as much as he could now that circumstances had forced his father to reveal one of his secrets. For years, his father had kept many of the things he did hidden, revealing them only when years had passed and the secret could no longer hurt him if it was exposed.

It had only been recently, when the aging baron confronted the fact that neither of his sons had managed to marry or produce a grandchild that he could pass the throne to, that he began to train his disappointing eldest child. At the time, Bastian had thought that he had finally earned his father's respect when he proved that he could recover from his fall, but now he felt like he'd only scratched the surface of the things his father hid from him.

"There was a woman once, a cripple with a lame leg and pretty, young girl in tow," the baron explained. "She showed up at the keep years ago, before you were even born, claiming to be my dead Aunt Caitlyn and saying the girl with her was my Uncle Brighton's daughter, Sybyll. It was lunacy!" Ian spat. "Pure madness!"

"And that's who's out there now?" Bastian asked, furrowing his brow as he tried to determine whether his father was telling him the pure truth or a version of the truth that concealed even greater secrets. "This Sybyll woman? You think she's involved with the Crimson Knight?"

"It would make it all make sense, wouldn't it?" Ian said, pausing his search around the room to focus on his son. "How else could a knight, even a vampire knight, become so strong? But if he's had a witch beside him all this time, then it all makes sense, doesn't it? But it also means we have to run," he said as he balled his meaty hands into fists that trembled with emotion.

He'd worked so hard, for so many years, to dig his barony out of the hole it had fallen into over the years. His treasury was once again filled with gold that even the Marquis didn't know he possessed, and he was ready to hire on enough zealots from across the sea to form an army that even Bastian could lead to victory in the Holy War to come.

Finally, people would stop suggesting that the Lothians should strip him of his title and lands in favor of a more aggressive lord who could lead an army to conquer Airgead Mountain and plunder its riches. He was about to do it, he was about to achieve what his father, his grandfather, and even his granduncle Brighten never had...

And now it was all going to be ripped away because of a stupid, silly girl who thought she had a claim to his throne! No doubt she'd spread her legs to win over the Crimson Knight, he realized. In fact, she probably even bore the heretic a brat that she could call the 'true heir' to his throne!

"Once a witch knows your name, if she's come to kill you, there's no way she'll stop," Ian said flatly. "Especially not this one. Not when she thinks I killed her mother. There won't be any surrendering to her or giving up territory for peace... she'll come for my head and yours too! She'll wipe us all out."

She would have to, Ian realized. If she wanted to place a child of her own on the throne, she'd have to exterminate the rest of the bloodline to do it. It was lunacy to think that she could seize power with a demon army and still rule over anything but a smoldering crater that would be all that remained once the Inquisition arrived to deal with her, but by the time she was burned at the stake for her heresy, Ian and anyone related to him were sure to be dead!

"But, but can't you just explain?" Bastian asked as he realized that he'd become implicated in this mess. "If she only thinks you killed her mother, just explain that you didn't. There's an Inquisitor out there who can light the flames of truth, you can prove it to her. A demon might be a bloodthirsty savage, but if this Sybyll woman can speak and reason like a human, then don't you think that..."

-SMACK!-

"Fool!" Ian shouted as his hand flew, slapping his idiot son across the face before he could utter another word that dripped with stupidity. "Of course, I had her mother killed! The woman claimed my father killed his own brother, my Uncle Brighton, just to take his throne! You don't know how much the people loved your granduncle, boy, but trust me, they never loved your grandfather half as much, and they love me even less."

Brighton Hanrahan was the hero who came back from the War of Four Templars covered in glory, and he'd spent his rewards lavishly, burning through the treasury to build not just his bell towers, but new cisterns in the poor quarters of the city, public fountains that required costly maintenance to save people a trip to the lakeshore to fetch water and all manner of other foolish expenses, often paying tradesmen twice as much as Ian would have and for half as much work!

Oh, the people loved Baron Brighton all right, but Ian Hanrahan had long resented the man for plundering the wealth that should have helped raise their family to greater glory and squandering it on things that only benefited the people who were meant to serve them.

"If that wretched woman convinced the people her words were true, do you know the damage it would have done?" Ian shouted as spittle flew from his lips along with a deep-seated loathing that had simmered in his belly for most of his life, splattering across Bastian's face as the baron raged. "You think I'd be sitting on the throne if rumors reached Marquis Bors' ears and gave him an excuse to hunt up some distant cousin to put on our throne and act like his puppet!"

"Father I, I..." Bastian stammered, unable to find words that would calm his father's fury as he slowly inched back from the man's imposing figure. None of this was his fault and he'd only tried to help, but it seemed like nothing he ever did or said would be good enough for the baron whose standards were higher than the fortress walls.

Perhaps even a paragon of capability like Loman Lothian would have been a disappointment to the scheming baron, Bastian realized as he imagined his father raging at the pious lord for being too righteous to go along with his hidden plans and plots. In the end, there was no way to win other than standing all but mute and doing as he was told.

"Just shut your mouth," Ian said. "And find something to use as a club. If that old fool Dollin won't help us run, then it'll be you who has to put him down."

"Y-yes, Father," the young lord managed to say before he went searching around the room for something that felt sturdier than the gilded candlesticks in the opulent chambers. If he had to knock a knight senseless, even one as old as Sir Dollin, a cheaply made piece of pewter with the thinnest layer of gold wrapped around it would never do the job.

Meanwhile, Ian Hanrahan turned to stare out the window, scowling at the bluish-green demonic light that mixed with the Church's golden glow to make the entire landscape look strange and foreign to his eyes.

He couldn't see the old farmhouse from here, it lay in the opposite direction from where the window faced, but he could see the tracks the demon army had left in the snow, and there wasn't the slightest sign that they'd sent a party to circle around the town's walls to where the farmhouse lay.

Which meant that whoever this witch was, she didn't know about the tunnels his great-grandfather had dug when the keep was first constructed. Nor did she know that he'd ordered fresh horses to be moved into the stables at the far end of the tunnels the very same day that he'd learned of the first demon attack against Sir Carwyn's caravan.

Lord Loman placing him under arrest had been one of the most humiliating insults he'd ever swallowed in his long years as the Baron of Hanrahan, but looking back on the moment, it gave him the perfect opportunity to escape this madness as the foolish young priest ordered every soldier other than the aging Sir Dollin to defend the town.

Now, only a single white haired knight stood between him and escape from a tragedy that would likely claim the Lothian Lord's life... and if the old man knew what was best for him, he would join his liege lord in their flight.

## Chapter 933: Last Minute Adjustments

For ten long minutes, Sybyll stood silently before the walls of Hanrahan Town.

Deep within her heart, she knew that Ian Hanrahan wasn't a man who would answer her challenge. He wasn't a man who would strap on his armor and face death, alone or at the head of an army. At best, he

might send his brat, Bastian, to face the woman who had come to claim her birthright, but he would never have the courage to face her directly.

Still, she gave him the time, standing in the cold and the snow at the head of her army, she waited with her face bare to the wind and her long-handled ax planted in the frozen earth while she cradled her helm in one hand.

While she waited, she listened, training the senses that had been honed just as much as the rest of her body on the defenders of Hanrahan Town and straining her ears to the limits until she could separate all of the individual threads of conversation.

"...Lord Loman says that nothing changes. Hold the line at the West Gate Plaza as long as you can..."

"...lords are mad men if they think a few arrows are going to do anything about those giants..."

"...abandon the gatehouse as soon as we've lit the oil or we'll burn alive in our own holy flames..."

"...waiting is the worst part, but after today, you'll call yourself a slayer of demons and you'll be boasting to your woman of this before you know it, just remember..."

There were more, countless more, as hundreds of men shuffled impatiently in their positions atop the walls or behind them, but as the lords and commanders of the Hanrahan forces passed their final orders or reassured their soldiers, they revealed their intentions to the woman in crimson armor who adjusted her plans in turn.

"It's time," Sybyll said when the minutes she'd generously given the defenders to prepare and Ian Hanrahan to do the right thing finally expired. "Heila, I'll be countin' on ye' ta' open tha' gates fer us," she said as she returned to the small cluster of people who would form the vanguard of the assault. "Hauke, tha' Inquisitor's hidin' in tha' gatehouse wit' barrels o' sacred oil ta' pour down an' set ablaze. Think ye' can stop 'im?"

"The windows are narrow slits," Hauke said confidently. "I can cover them with ice thick enough that they'll need minutes with an ax to open them up again."



"Those slits are for archers to fire out at us," Captain Ipiktok rumbled as he knelt with the other captains. "I saw this at the Summer Villa. Inside the gatehouse, the floor is filled with holes to thrust spears through or pour oil on people advancing through the gates. It's a coward's way of fighting from within a stone shell," he added with a disdainful snort from the end of his long, flexible trunk.

"Humans are weak and frail," Heila reminded the Eldritch captains. "Their methods of fighting rely on clever tricks, ambushes, superior weapons, and more, all to make up for their weakness and frailty. It isn't cowardice, and if you think them cowards, they will kill you with their cunning."

The Vale of Mists had learned this the hard way over more than a century of war, as had the people of Airgead Mountain and the Southern Steppe. With each war, the humans learned new things, and they grew stronger and more dangerous. If they didn't, then men like Liam Dunn would never have been able to drive so many Eldritch villagers from their homes, and the Eldritch people would have retaken their lands long ago.

"Holes in the floor," Hauke said, furrowing his white, bushy brows in thought. "I can still fill them with ice, but I need to see them. I'll have to get close," he said nervously as he looked at the archers on the wall.

"We'll clear a path fer ye," Dame Sybyll reassured the young Frost Walker lord. "Ipiktok, yer job remains the same, and so do tha' rest o' yers," she said as she looked around the group of captains. "Jalal, leave me cousin here wit' Lady Heila's squire fer tha' first wave. There are some templars standing wit' Sir Tommin in tha' plaza who need a dancin' partner. Think yer' up to it?"

"And here I thought I'd come all this way to be a nursemaid," the feline lord purred with a wide grin on his thin lips. "How many of these men in metal do I need to dance with while you deal with their leader?"

"Four from tha' sounds o' it," Sybyll said bluntly. "Too many?" she asked when she saw the eagerness fade from his eyes and his hands tighten on the hilts of the long, wickedly curved knives he wore at his waist.

"Four ordinary knights would be a challenge, my beautiful Crimson Dancer," Lord Jalal admitted. "It takes time to find the gaps in their armor and tear them apart. Four Templars is a bit much, even for me."

"Then ye' need help from a slayer o' champions," Sybyll said as she began working at the straps of her darksteel gauntlets, temporarily removing her left gauntlet to reveal a pale hand with slender, delicate-looking fingers.

"Kurtz," she called to the horned gladiator who stood guard over Liam Dunn. "Let me cousin Hugo watch over Lord Liam there," she said. "Hugo can kill 'im if he tries to run. Lord Jalal needs a Champion to dance wit tha' Templars wit' 'im."

"Dame Sybyll?" Kurz asked in confusion as he knelt before the commander of the army and Lady Heila whom he had pledged to protect. He understood that she needed very little protection from him most of the time, and he'd been content to act as Liam Dunn's jailer because it allowed him to watch over Emmie.

Now, however, his heart hammered in his chest as he anticipated a return to battle, even as his mind shouted at him that human Templars might be a greater champion than he was capable of defeating.

"I won't take ye as one o' me progeny," Sybyll said as she used the edge of her ax to slice into the palm of her pale hand, cutting a thin, crimson line into her pale flesh as she concentrated on the power that slumbered within her blood. "But until tha' sun rises, ye' can have strength like one o' mine," she said with a smile as she held out her hand to the wide-eyed gladiator.

"So drink. Taste the Potence of Blood," she said as an aura of bloody power filled the air with the feeling of the barely restrained carnage that sang in the hearts of every warrior who had known the red haze of fierce battles. "And spill blood on the snow as if it were tha' sands of yer arena."

#### Chapter 934: A Night Of Blood And Death Begins

"My people 'o Hanrahan," Sybyll shouted toward the town once her final preparations were in place. "Since tha' murderin' son 'o tha usurper won't face me, I will come fer his head an' offer it to ye' all fer what ye've suffered under 'is rule," she said, allowing her voice to ripple with power as it spread to every corner of the hometown she'd only ever been able to visit in hiding.

"Keep ta' yer homes," she added. "Soldiers 'o me home, throw down yer arms and go back ta' yer homes an' ye won'a be harmed. But fight today, an' stand wit Ian, and know ye will die ta a man!"

It was her final warning and the last chance for surrender she intended to give her enemies tonight. She doubted many would flee the battlefield and she could already hear the templars and the Inquisitor calling out that the words of a demon or a witch weren't to be trusted. Still, she had tried, and she would rest with a clean conscience no matter how much blood fell on snow tonight because she had.

"Ipiktok!" Sybyll shouted as she placed her darksteel helm on her head, hiding her enchanting visage behind the red mask of a steel skull with gleaming fangs that would strike fear into the hearts of even the bravest warrior. "There are traitors and cowards on me walls. Remove them!"

There might only be ten of the Tuscan giants in the Second Army but they were quickly becoming one of the Vale's preferred tools for cracking open the fortified defenses of human settlements.

When Ashlynn commanded them in battle at the Summer Villa, she outfitted them with stout shields to resist archers as they brought a heavy ram to bear against the gates. Dame Sybyll, however, had no need of a gate-crasher. Instead, she'd been impressed by Heila's tale of facing Ipiktok in the arena and the weapon his men used to establish dominance from the very beginning of the battle.

-HAAAAAARRRRUUUUUUUMMMMM-

The sound of Tuscan trumpet blasts filled the air, echoing across the valley like the horns of the damned calling out to warn the living that they would soon join the ranks of the dead. Moments later, another sound filled the air, as if Lord Jalal's drummers had only been waiting for this moment to resume their playing.

-BOOM- -BOOM- -CLACK- -BOOM BOOM BOOM- -CLACK- -BOOM BOOM BOOM-

The powerful rhythm of the drums filled the air, stirring the blood of Sybyll's army and infusing them with a strength that went beyond what even the most elite soldiers of the Second Army normally possessed. Strength that turned the already monstrous Tuscans into a terrifying force worthy of being called 'demons.'

"Iron shot!" Ipiktok called as he loaded a smooth iron ball the size of an apple into his sling and began to spin it rapidly over his head. A heartbeat later, the whirring sound of ten slings spinning filled the air until Ipiktok shouted his next order. "Loose!"

Sybyll's army stood more than a hundred paces beyond the range of even the best archer on the walls but the distance hardly mattered to the Tuscan slingers who flung balls of iron as if they were nothing heavier than a skipping stone hurled by a small child.

The archers on the wall knew they were out of range for their own arrows so most of them were caught completely by surprise when the giants began to hurl stones at them from hundreds of paces away. Those who had been peeking out from behind the crenellations on the battlements, learned too late that while their enemy was out of the reach of their bows, the defenders were well within the reach of the giants!

Stone exploded in showers of sharp fragments as the iron shot pounded the top of the walls. Men howled in pain as bits of their own fortress wall cut deep into their exposed faces while larger chunks of stone smashed into helms or rained down on their bodies.

Of all the carnage that swept the walls as the iron shot pummeled the stone battlements, however, nothing was more terrifying than the man unlucky enough to be struck directly by one of the Tuscan's iron balls.

One moment, he was standing in his position with an arrow knocked and ready to draw. The next moment, his head vanished in an explosion of red and gray flesh, splattering across several of his companions who stared in horror as the headless body stood perfectly still, bow still at the ready as if it hadn't yet realized it was dead before it finally toppled over.

"W-what was that?" a grizzled, gray haired soldier who had fought the demons as a young man during the War of Inches said as he stared in shock at the headless body laying atop the snow. "What manner of thing..." he stammered as he crouched behind the wall, too terrified to look out at the demon army to see what was happening.

"Again!" Ipiktok commanded his men as he reloaded his sling and set it spinning again. Beside him, a small barrel sitting atop a sled held dozens more of the iron balls. More than enough to soften up the defenses of the enemy before the army advanced and he was in no hurry to charge before they'd emptied their barrels. "As fast as you can fire, clear the walls!"

It was never Ipiktok's goal to kill the human defenders directly. In fact, it wasn't even his goal to kill them at all. The force of impact from their iron sling bullets was enough to shatter stone with explosive force and the shrapnel from those explosions would inflict plenty of wounds on the Hanrahan defenders.

For now, all he needed to do was batter them so badly that none of the archers dared to stand up to take a shot, and thus far, it seemed like Dame Sybyll had been right about how effective that would be.

While Ipiktok's giants hammered the battlements, raking the length of the walls to either side of the West Gate with a constant barrage of iron balls, the smallest figure on the battlefield made her own move, striding out in front of the army and raising her wand to point at the iron-bound wooden gates that barred their way.

"Through wood's decay and water's flow,

Let timber's strength now ebb and go.

What years would claim, let moments take,

Till fortress gates before me break."

The wood of the mighty gates had already begun to weaken with the passage of time, and the West Gate had suffered the most since the only people who used it were the common farmers of the valley and the men brave enough or stupid enough to search for their fortune in the wilderness near Airgead Mountain. The East Gate, by contrast, received distinguished visitors like Lord Loman and was never allowed to reveal a shabby side to the world.

Now, those years of neglect became the gap in the wall's defenses that Heila focused her witchcraft on, prying at it until the wooden defenses gave way and submitted to her will.

Stout timbers, each one more than a handsbreadth thick began to crack and splinter as a pale, silvery green energy crawled up from the frozen ground beneath them. Chunks of wood the size of a baker's rolling pin fell from the gate before crumbling into piles of rotten wood-dust when they struck the ground.

The reinforcing bands of iron that gave the gate more than half its strength clattered to the ground a few heartbeats later as nails pulled free from wood that had grown too soft to hold them. A few

heartbeats later, only a few scraps of wood still clung to the iron hinges, leaving nothing of the once mighty gate behind.

"Forward," Heila commanded the glowing silver-green tendrils of her power, sending them crawling like a spider into the tunnel beneath the gatehouse as they lashed at the wooden portcullis, tearing it to splinters in half the time it had taken to destroy the first gate.

Standing several paces behind her, Liam Dunn felt his heart grow cold and he pinched himself in disbelief as he watched the diminutive witch tear through the castle's defenses as though they were nothing but thin parchment.

Next to him, the even more diminutive figure of Heila's squire watched with wide, unblinking eyes as she refused to miss even a moment of her teacher's power.

Finally, Heila's onslaught of rot and decay reached its end as the inner gate at the far side of the gatehouse tunnel crumbled into splinters and dust, revealing the shining armored figure of Sir Tommin Pyre and the Templars who stood at his side.

Beyond them, rank after rank of armored soldiers stood, representing the Temple Guard, the Lothian March, and several of the nearby villages as well. All in all, more than a hundred men had assembled in the West Gate Plaza, ready to spend their lives to stop Sybyll's army from spreading into the streets of the town.

"Sir Tommin Pyre," Dame Sybyll said as a predatory grin formed on her lips behind the fangs of her helm's visor. "It's time to learn if you really are as strong as the rumors say..."

#### Chapter 935: Potence Of Blood vs. Purity Of Faith (Part One)

The inner gate had barely crumbled away when Sybyll charged forward, her crimson armor catching the wavering blue-green light from above as she shot across the snow-covered ground, reaching the gatehouse in less than the blink of an eye as she rushed toward the West Gate Plaza.

Under Loman's orders, the roughly square marketplace, where three roads converged in a space little more than fifty paces on a side, had been transformed into a hastily prepared battlefield intended to stall the advancing army like rats caught in a kettle. Tables where men would once have haggled over

the price of a wagon-load of timber or a cask of grain had been overturned and piled up as improvised barricades between the sides of warehouses and across the roads.

Behind those crude wooden barriers stood ranks of shield-bearing soldiers, clutching nervously at their warhammers and wishing they could trade places with the spearmen behind them, or better yet, the men who were safe in the gatehouse preparing to douse the demons with sacred oils.

Even Sir Niall, standing at the rear of the group guarding the north road, and Sir Thorryn standing in a matching position to the south, wished they had never left their villages as they watched what had once been a sturdy oak gate crumble to little more than kindling before their eyes.

At the center of the plaza, Sir Tommin waited with his four brother Templars, their white tabards gleaming in the warm, rose-gold light of the Temple at the heart of town.

"In His Light we stand!" Sir Tommin shouted as he drew the long, two-handed sword from his sheath, bathing the entire plaza in a cold white light that reflected brilliantly off the snow on the ground.

"In His Light we stand!" the Templars beside him echoed half a heartbeat before Sybyll's crimson figure entered the plaza, her oversized axe trailing wisps of shadow that seemed to devour the light.

-CLANG!-

-CRACK!-

The clash between Sybyll's axe and Tommin's sword occurred at a speed that was difficult for anyone to describe and if not for the bright light leaving after images in their eyes, no one would have been sure what happened when the Crimson Knight's axe slammed into the stone pavers, cleaving a deep gouge into the stones beneath the snow and sending rock chips pinging off the armor of the nearby templars.

Sir Tommin's forearms trembled with the force of just the glancing blow that he'd only barely managed to redirect as he sidestepped, successfully sending the Crimson Knight's powerful overhand blow harmlessly into the ground but leaving him too awkwardly positioned for a follow-up strike of his own.

"We're doomed," Sir Nial said, nearly dropping the mace in his hand as the shockwave of the powerful blow knocked snow from the nearby eaves. "No one can fight a demon like that," he muttered in disbelief. But despite his words, Sir Tommin wasn't just fighting back, somehow, he'd completely avoided the Crimson Knight's opening blow!

The moment of respite Sir Tommin's deflection bought him lasted only a moment, however, before the half-moon shaped headsman's axe was once again swinging toward him, this time in a low, flat arc that would cleave his legs from his torso if he couldn't block it!

-CLANG!-

-CLANG!-

This time, he was able to counterattack after deflecting the wicked blade, even though the Crimson Knight quickly blocked with the haft of her axe, and the two fell into a rapid, deadly dance as the shining, holy sword and wicked, darksteel axe probed for the slightest gaps in their opponent's armor.

Beneath the grinning skull visage of her helm's visor, Sybyll's face contorted in pain as she struggled to keep the glowing sword of light at bay. Each time the sacred sword appeared directly in her vision, it was accompanied by a searing, burning pain, as if a hot brand had been pressed against her eyes, and within just a few exchanges, she could already feel her body struggling to heal the damage of the purifying light that sought to cleanse her flesh of Nyrielle's power.

Worse, just standing in the presence of the Holy Light Blade sapped a significant amount of strength from her body, transforming her heavy suit of darksteel armor into a steel prison that she had to struggle against in order to fight instead of giving her virtual impunity from the blades of her opponents on the field of battle.

"How is yer faith so pure after what ye've done, Tommin Pyre?" Sybyll taunted as she locked her axe haft against his blade and rushed forward with a shoulder, knocking the Templar back several steps, giving her a bit of room to use the blade of her ax to shield her eyes from the agonizing glow of the sword in his hands. "How can a man like ye still call 'imself Holy?"

"My faith isn't for demons or vampires to question," Sir Tommin said as he flexed his fingers on the hilt of his sword, adjusting his grip and fighting to restore feeling after the shock of heavy blows against his



blade left his arms tingling from fingertip to elbow. "And if you've stooped to taunting me, then it tells me that you're weak before the Light of our Lord!"

The realization that the famed Crimson Knight was struggling against his Holy Light Blade reaffirmed everything Sir Tommin held to be true and right in this world. He might be fighting to defend an unscrupulous, scheming baron, but it wasn't Ian Hanrahan he was truly protecting. It was the common folk of this town, the templars and the soldiers, who fought with him and the holy Temple that glowed with the brilliance of faith at the beating heart of Hanrahan Town.

Compared to all the lives that depended on him stopping this unholy woman who profaned everything that it meant to be a knight, his own life meant less than nothing, but he would use every ounce of strength in his body to put an end to her wickedness.

And if he died tonight, then he would die with a pure heart that had done everything it could in the service of the Holy Lord of Light and his chosen people.

#### Chapter 936: Potence Of Blood vs. Purity Of Faith (Part Two)

"Yer tha' one who's weak," Sybyll shouted as she charged forward, this time striking out with a thrust from the butt of her ax to force Tommin to defend himself before slamming the blade of her ax into his armored shoulder.

Metal screamed as it tore under the force of the blow and the blade of the darksteel axe sheared through links of chain like a tailor's scissors through wool before the edge of the blade cut through the cloth of Tommin's gambeson, tasting flesh and spilling blood at last. As soon as the blade touched flesh, crimson rivulets began to flow upward from the wound, following deep channels in the blade before sinking into hooked, angular runes that pulsed with a lurid red glow.

Sir Tommin staggered back, swinging his sword to force distance between them, but immediately felt the unnatural cold spreading from his wound. Where the axe had cut him, a creeping numbness began to sap the strength from his arm, and he could feel darkness spreading beneath his skin like writhing maggots gnawing through his flesh in search of a tastier meal.

"Brother Tommin!" one of the Templars called out, raising his voice in prayer. "Oh Holy Lord of Light, grant strength to your faithful servant! Let your radiance burn away the corruption that seeks to claim him!"

The other three Templars joined their voices to his, and warm golden light began to push back against the spreading darkness in Tommin's wound, though it could not heal the flesh that had already been torn

"I may be weak," Tommin agreed as he flexed the fingers of his wounded arm, adjusting his stance into a lower guard that put less strain on his wounded shoulder. "But the Holy Lord of Light is stronger than you will ever be, and he will never abandon his faithful! You cannot win, demon," he shouted as his sword pulsed with an even brighter radiance.

"Never abandon ye?" Sybyll scoffed. "Commin' from ye, that'd be a laugh if it weren't a crime. Yer the one who abandoned 'is wife an' child," Sybyll snapped as she flung an arm up to shield her eyes from the pulsing, blinding light of Tommin's blade. "Yer the one who turned them inta targets fer Owain Lothian's schemes," she taunted. "So how is yer faith so pure when ye forsake yer vows ta mother an' son?"

"Don't you dare speak of my family!" Tommin shouted in fury as he swung his sword in a wide arc. He wasn't standing close enough to the vampire for his blade to reach her, but he wasn't trying to cut her with the steel of his sword.

Instead, the blade flashed even brighter as Tommin cut a radiant arc through the air that extended far beyond the tip of his blade. While Sybyll quickly moved to block the arc of light with the blade of her ax, several motes of brilliant white light still slipped past her guard, piercing into the crimson darksteel of her breast plate with the force of a knight's lance.

"AAaaaarrrrrgggg!" Sybyll cried in pain and fury as the light pierced not only the breastplate but through the links of chain mail beneath it, leaving bloody wounds across her ribs that smoked and smoldered as she struggled to extinguish the light.

"Look! The demon can bleed," Sir Thorryn shouted, raising a cheer from the men under his command. "If it can bleed, it can die!"

"You don'a want ta' speak of family?" Sybyll spat as her wounds filled with darkness that snuffed out the light. Ignoring the cheers and exclamations of the men around her, she focused all of her attention on the Templar standing before her, stalking towards him as she raised her ax high.

"Ye won't speak of yer family, but what about mine?" Sybyll asked rhetorically. "Me own father died to shield me an' me mother from 'is brother's blade!" Sybyll cried, pouring out the anguish in her heart as she charged again at the Templar with the radiant blade.

-CLAAAAAANGGGG!- -SKREEEEEEET!-

Light and darkness exploded against each other, and metal screamed in protest as Sybyll's heavy overhand blow nearly knocked Tommin to his knees. Instead, the half-moon-shaped blade of her axe slid along half the length of Tommin's blade before finally stopping on his cross guard as Sybyll pressed up close against the overwhelmed Templar.

"Me mother died on that scheming bastard Ian's blade," Sybyll snarled. "Jus' fer tha' crime o' tryin' ta' get him ta' admit that I was his own blood kin! But he'd sooner kill a crippled woman than see me with a sliver o' me birthright!"

-CLANG!- -CLANG!- -CLANG!-

Steel rang against steel as Sybyll poured her fury into her speed, battering Tommin's defenses and driving him constantly back to the edge of the plaza where ranks of armored soldiers stood in awe at the fight unfolding before their eyes.

They had all been warned not to involve themselves in the battles between the Templars and the powerful demons who would slaughter them in the blink of eye but it was only now that they understood the difference between an ordinary soldier and the paragons of the Church like Sir Tommon... and by the same token, it was only now that they grasped just how lethal the great demons were and how helpless they would be without the Church to protect them.

"So what kind 'o man are ye?" Sybyll shouted as she slammed a gauntleted fist into the breastplate of Tommin's armor, leaving the imprint of her fist on the once perfectly smooth armor plate.

"What kind o' husband are ye ta' yer wife? What kind o' father are ye ta' yer son?" Sybyll yelled as the blade of her axe bit deeply into the gap between Sir Tommin's cuirass and his tassets, parting links of mail and leaving another festering wound along his ribs that sheathed with darkness before the Templars could once again summon their holy light to cleanse the wound.

"Where are ye when they're lyin' sick an' dyin' from Owain's poisons?" Sybyll hissed as she slammed bodily into the reeling knight so she could deliver her most cutting words visor to visor. "Where are ye when they need their man ta' keep 'em safe?"

Each word was another blow, not only against Sir Tommin's heart, but landing physically on his body as Sybyll punctuated her questions with punches, shoulder checks, or short, sharp thrusts with the blade of her axe from just inches away as she refused to give him the room to swing his word or bring the gleaming Holy Light Blade before her eyes where it could do the most harm.

Pain flooded Tommin's mind as he struggled to regain control of the battle, grasping the blade of his sword with one hand as he tried to guide its point to a gap, any gap, in the crimson, demonic armor the vampire wore. But more than pain, confusion, and fear wormed its way into his heart as he listened to Sybyll's words.

Owain had schemed against his family? They were sick and dying? He had left them and joined the Church precisely to protect them from Owain's retaliation! So how was it that they were suffering at the hands of his murderous former master now that he'd cut all ties with his family?

"How?" Tommin asked as he grappled with the Crimson Knight, pressing the visor of his helm directly up against hers and staring into her crimson eyes through the slits in their helms. "How do you even know that? And why should I believe the words of a demon?"

#### Chapter 937: Late To The Party

When Sybyll charged across the gap between her army and the forces assembled inside the wall, it was a signal to the entire army that the next phase of the battle had begun. The sound of her axe striking stone echoed through the gatehouse tunnel, immediately answered by a renewed fury from Captain Ipiktok's bombardment.

-WHOOOM- -CRACK- -WHOOOM-

Iron shot hammered the battlements with faster and faster, no longer seeking individual targets but creating a devastating barrage that forced the remaining defenders to cower behind whatever cover they could find. The once neatly notched crenellations of the battlements now resembled the broken teeth of a bareknuckled fighter and men who had once stood proud with bow and arrow in hand now

crawled on their bellies, dragging wounded companions away from the most exposed sections of the wall.

Under this protective storm of iron and exploding stone, four figures charged toward the gatehouse, following in Dame Sybyll's wake.

As the thunder of Tuscan slings provided cover, Hauke could hear the distant ring of steel on steel from the plaza beyond his soft white fur stood on end as he felt the ripple of intense energies unleashed by the violent collision of Dame Sybyll's darksteel ax and Sir Tommin Pyre's Holy Light Blade

"Wait until Hauke seals the ceiling of the gatehouse!" Heila reminded Lord Jalal and Kurtz as they ran. The Eldritch Lord of Airgead Mountain simply nodded, as if he would never forget such an important detail, but Kurtz nearly stumbled as they ran, belatedly realizing that he'd been overcome by the sensation of power infusing his body as Sybyll's potent blood pumped through his veins.

"Snow, swirl and dance!" Heila commanded as they ran, drawing on the power of Snow Fang at her hip to sweep the snow from the ground and fling it into the air in a blinding flurry of drifting flakes that would obscure the vision of anyone in the gatehouse who thought to attack them through the building's narrow arrow slits.

Truthfully, Heila needn't have worried. The room above the tunnel through the gate wasn't large enough to hold many men and Inquisitor Diarmuid and the acolytes from the temple already felt cramped after squeezing into the confined space to pray over barrels of oil as they awaited the right moment to unleash holy flames that would seal the gate and incinerate any demon foolish enough to attempt to follow after the Crimson Knight.

Unfortunately, for all of their years of study and their limited experiences directly facing Eldritch forces, neither Diarmuid nor Loman Lothian had ever fought against a Frost Walker, nor comprehended what it would mean to have a sorcerer with an iridescent horn working so directly against their plans.

After days of squeezing every drop of moisture out of the sky to fuel the snowstorms, the air was painfully cold and dry, but even without moisture in the air to turn into ice, there was plenty of snow on the ground to fuel Hauke's sorcery and the young Frost Walker lord had long ago learned the methods to reshape snow into ice.

As soon as the small group reached the entrance to the tunnel through the gatehouse, Hauke knelt down low, brushing the tips of his claws through the snow on the ground as his horn began to glow with a pale, icy blue radiance.

"Tiny crystals, pack and bind, flow like water, fill the gaps, pierce what you find," Hauke intoned as he firmly envisioned the shape he wanted the ice to take. The simplest solution would have been to create a thick sheet of ice that lined the roof of the tunnel, blocking the murder holes and sealing off any ability the people in the gatehouse had to attack people moving through the tunnel. A lesser sorcerer would have done exactly that.

Hauke, however, understood all too well that such a structure would have been weak and vulnerable, cracking and falling to the ground as soon as the people above attacked it with enough force. So instead, Hauke focused on filling each individual hole in the ceiling, drawing in snow from both ends of the tunnel and transforming it into thin spikes of ice that shot into the holes, plugging each of them individually.

But Hauke's sorcery did more than just fill the gaps. After spending so much time studying and practicing with Heila and the other members of the coven, Hauke had begun to think about how he should incorporate trees into the sorcery that he was already familiar with, and his simple invocation was one of his first attempts to fuse the growth of trees with the spread of ice.

"Watch out!"

"AAAAA! It's cold and it burns!"

In the room above, Inquisitor Diarmuid and four acolytes scrambled away from the murder holes as spears of ice shot upward, seemingly through every single murder hole at once! One acolyte, who had been leaning over the holes in the floor while preparing to pour oil, howled in pain as one of the spears of ice pierced his white and gold robes, staining them crimson with blood as it sliced through fabric and flesh with equal ease, leaving a deep gouge running from his elbow to his shoulder.

Hauke's sorcery didn't end there. Like the branches of a tree, each spear of ice spread outward, thrusting more spears of ice into the room as if they were seeking people to impale.

"Get back!" Diarmuid shouted, tripping over his robes and falling flat on his backside as he scrambled away from the expanding forest of icy spears.

"HAAAAAA!" One of the other acolytes screamed in agony as two branches impaled him from opposite directions, his cry of pain mixing with the distant shouts of wounded men on the walls above. The flickering reddish-gold torchlight in the gatehouse caught the crystalline rivulets of frozen blood at the ends of the ice spears, creating grotesque jewelry that sparkled and gleamed even as the man's face contorted in a gruesome mask of pain.

Outside the gatehouse, the bombardment continued its relentless rhythm, punctuated by the occasional cry of "Keep yer positions, ye fatherless sons of whores!" or "Take cover over here!" from the defenders struggling to maintain any sense of order in the chaos of stone shrapnel and blood stained snow.

-THUNK- -CRACK- -SPLASH-

The people in the gatehouse weren't the only targets of Hauke's Ice Forest. Several of the barrels of blessed oil were pierced or jostled by the spears of ice, cracking open, toppling over and spilling their contents across the interior of the gatehouse.

"H-h-holy L-lord of L-light above," the impaled acolyte began to pray as he clutched at the wound in his stomach. "Bath m-me in the warmth of your sacred..."

"Stop, you fool, don't you dare!" Diarmuid shouted as he scrambled back to his feet. "We're standing in a pool of sacred oil! If you try to melt the ice with your flames, you'll roast us all alive," he snapped as he searched the room for one of the heavy axes intended for chopping ropes to lower the portcullis in an emergency.

"You there," he said, pointing to one of the two acolytes who had been fortunate enough to escape unscathed. "Take up an axe and help me cut him free. You two," he added, pointing to the first man to be injured and the other fortunate acolyte who had hidden behind a giant winch when the ice first appeared. "Clear a path to the door, we can heal the wounded on the wall outside."

"Y-yes, Inquisitor!" the men stammered as they quickly got to work.

"Hold on," Diarmuid told the shivering acolyte who stood trembling in the middle of the forest of ice. "We'll cut you free soon," he said as he smashed one of the branches with the blade of the axe, filling the room with the tinkling sound of shattering ice as he hacked his way forward.

In the back of his mind, there was a part of Diarmuid that wanted to leave the work of freeing the man to the other acolytes. A part of him that was afraid that the longer he spent trapped in this gatehouse, the worse things would be for the soldiers who were depending on him to use his flames to stop the demon's army.

But as much as that part of him clamored at him to abandon the acolyte that he hadn't even known two hours ago, there was a greater part of him that knew the man would die if he wasn't healed soon... And if he left this man to die when he could have done something to save him, then a part of him would die along with the acolyte.

And so Diarmuid threw himself into the work, smashing at the demonic ice with wild abandon as the fires in his heart burned with fear for what was happening to the soldiers outside the gatehouse and an unwavering need to save every man he could. He just hoped that by the time he was able to rejoin the battle, it wasn't too late.

#### Chapter 938: Storming The Wall (Part One)

"Well done, Little Brother," Heila said with a faint smile on her lips as she placed a hand on the young Frost Walker lord's knee. The screams of pain and fear above her tugged at her healer's heart, but just as she had done on the sands of the arena, she clamped down firmly on her resolve and reminded herself that the sooner they brought the battle to an end, the fewer people would suffer and die.

"Lord Jalal, Kurtz," Heila said as she looked down the short tunnel to the plaza where Dame Sybyll and Sir Tommin clashed. "Those templars have bad manners," she said with a frown as she watched them supporting Tommin with healing energy. "Teach them to fight their own battles," she said.

Both warriors gave only the briefest of nods before charging toward the plaza, each racing with blood that boiled at the notion of interlopers interfering with what should have been a duel between Champions.

Heila, however, still had one last task to perform as she crouched in the entryway of the tunnel.



"Snow, shimmer and shine," she said, once again clutching the hilt of Snow Fang as she drew on the power of the blade to control the snow that covered the ground. In a few short heartbeats, a whirlwind of snowflakes shot high into the sky before exploding in a glittering flurry of radiant, purple flakes.

It was the signal that Sybyll's army had been waiting for and it had come only minutes after Ipiktok's Tuscans began their bombardment. Now the way was clear and the entire army thundered forward.

-BOOM BOOM- -BOOM BOOM- -CLACK- -CLACK- -CLACK- -CLACK- -CLACK- -BOOM BOOM- ...

The beat of the drums changed yet again, bringing swiftness like the wind to the feet of hundreds of soldiers as they charged across the snow.

-PFFFFFFFFEET!-

"RAMPS!" Ipiktok shouted as he returned his sling to his belt only to bend down and grab a thick, heavy rope that connected to one corner of a tree trunk more than fifty paces long and three paces across that Lady Heila had hewn in half for the entire length of the tree.

Next to him, another Tuscan took up the rope on the opposite corner before both men charged toward a position on the wall more than fifty paces to the left of the West Gate. The massive half-trunk carved a deep furrow through the snow as they dragged it, leaving behind a trail of wood shavings and exposed bark where the rough-hewn surface scraped against the frozen ground.

One hundred paces away, another pair of Tuscans grabbed the other half of the tree trunk and hauled it toward their own position fifty paces to the right of the west gate. The primitive nature of Heila's battlefield carpentry was immediately apparent—jagged splinters jutted from the cut surface, and the bark remained intact along the rounded side, making the makeshift ramp treacherous even before enemy action.

Behind them, the Second Army split into three columns. To the left and right, fifty Golden Eyed skirmishers ran with curved knives already drawn as they prepared to be the first to rush up the ramps that Ipiktok and the remaining Tuscans were raising into place. Behind them, twenty Glass Eyed archers followed close behind, bows at the ready in case they saw any sign that the humans were poking their heads above the walls now that the bombardment of iron shot had ended.

"UUUUUUJRRRRRAAAAAARRGGGGG," the Tuscans roared as they heaved their burdens against the stone walls, slamming them into place with a loud -CRUNCH- that shook snow and broken bits of stone from the battlements above.

As the first ramp settled into position, the advancing column began to slow as the ramp that had sounded like a quick path to the top of the wall when the plans were explained now looked rough, narrow, wobbly and unreasonably steep even to the most nimble and sure-footed among the Golden Eyed Warriors.

"Up! Up! Storm the walls!" Captain Rafal shouted, lashing out with a claw at anyone who hesitated as the first wave of skirmishers bounded toward the left ramp. Their lupine agility was the only thing that made such a crude assault path feasible in the first place, but if they slowed their pace, they were doomed to fail before they made it even half way up the ramp.

The first Golden Eyed warrior had barely gained his footing on the narrow, rough hewn surface of the ramp when an arrow sprouted from his chest, sending him tumbling backward into his companions with an anguished cry.

"ARCHERS!" one of the human defenders shouted from the walls above. "Take them as they climb!"

But before the human archers could loose a second volley, Glass Eyed bowmen behind the assault responded with their own deadly accuracy. Three arrows flew upward in perfect unison, and a heartbeat later, a lightly armored soldier tumbled through the air before crashing onto the broken stones below with a meaty -SPLAT- that dyed the snow red for three paces in every direction.

"Faster! Follow me," Captain Rafal shouted, charging to the front of the line and sprinting up the improvised ramp as fast as he could run. So long as he moved quickly, his steps were light and the ramp was stable, quickly delivering him to the battlements above where startled humans scattered at the sudden appearance of the Golden Eyed warrior wielding curved knives that looked like fangs ready to tear through their flesh.

As more skirmishers crowded onto the primitive ramps, the structural weaknesses of Heila's improvised constructs became devastatingly apparent. The left ramp began to groan and sway under the weight of a dozen climbers and the massive log shifted against the wall with each step.

-CRACK- -CRACK- -CREEEEEEAK-

"It's giving way!" one of the Golden Eyed warriors shouted, just as the warrior ahead of him lost his footing on the swaying, narrow surface of the log. Both tumbled sideways, their claws scrabbling desperately for purchase as they fell into the snow below with bone-jarring impacts.

"BRACE!" Ipiktok shouted at his fellow Tuscans, ordering more men into position beside the ramps, kneeling on the ground to slide their shoulders under the heavy logs and absorbing the shock of the climbing soldiers with their own bodies.

Like the ramps themselves, it was a crude, improvised strategy, but it gave them the stability they needed for dozens of soldiers to quickly scale the walls, and for Sybyll's plan to succeed, that was all they needed.

#### Chapter 939: Storming The Wall (Part Two)

While the left and right wings advanced toward ramps that would carry them to the top of the town walls, Captain Ultrech's heavily armored Iron Tusk soldiers let loose with their own battle cry as they formed a single, cohesive block of men, charging straight toward the tunnel through the gatehouse toward the plaza beyond.

"Trample! Trample! Trample!"

The sound of armor jangling filled the air along with the rhythmic -THUD- -THUD- of a hundred feet marching in perfect unison at a pace that would rival trotting horses. But even the best trained of horses would struggle to match the disciplined pace with perfect spacing and interlocking shields that the Iron Tusks soldiers displayed as they advanced inexorably toward their enemies.

"Mark your targets!" the Glass Eyed captain following behind the rush of armored infantry shouted to the remaining twenty archers who followed him. "Don't waste an arrow on a hasty shot, Lord Hauke will give us cover!"

"Here that, Little Brother," Heila said as she tugged on Hauke's snow-white fur. "It's time for us to move, we have to finish preparing the way."

Each step in the assault was a carefully coordinated dance, and every dancer had their role to play. Dame Sybyll and the Tuscans struck powerful blows that completely overwhelmed the defenders, forcing them into an even more passive, reactive posture than they'd been at the beginning and allowing the Second Army to dictate the flow of the battle.

Heila and Hauke were here to pave the way, from rotting away the gates to sealing off the murder holes in the gatehouse tunnel, their most important task was to ensure that the rest of the army was able to advance. Now, they raced down the length of the tunnel for the next stage of their advance.

As soon as they entered the plaza, Hauke stumbled to a stop, staring wide eyed at the clash between Sybyll, Lord Jalal, Kurtz and the Templars arrayed against them. He hadn't even begun to process what he was seeing, however, before Heila gave him a pointed shove to one side of the tunnel.

"I'll protect you," she said, unfurling her whip with a sharp -SNAP- that startled the defenders in the plaza who were only now realizing that even more 'demons' were coming through the gatehouse. Thankfully, with the intensity of the battle already taking place in the small plaza, none of the other defenders seemed inclined to charge forward when the diminutive witch took up her position standing guard over her much larger and more imposing friend.

"Focus on your barriers," Heila said. "The archers will be counting on you."

"I understand," Hauke replied, forcing himself to turn away from the spectacle in the plaza in order to focus on the complex structures of ice he needed to build.

Just as the humans had turned over tables and piled up improvised barricades in order to control movement on the battle field and blunt the attacker's ability to rampage freely through the city, Hauke needed to protect the flanks of the advancing army from the Hanrahan forces blocking the streets to either side of the West Gate.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, Hauke raised the Runic Blade of Eternal Ice above his horn, holding it out flat and parallel to the ground with one hand on the hilt and the other bracing the blade's hilt. His iridescent horn blazed with pure icy blue radiance that flowed from the tip of his horn to the flat of the sword, lighting up one archaic rune after another until nearly a third of the runes on the blade pulsed with Hauke's power.

"From snow to crystal. Crystal to wall. Tower above, and thick to guard," he intoned, filling the plaza with a deep, rumbling voice that echoed off the stone walls just the way it had echoed off the towering mountains of the high pass, carrying power and intention that was clearer than the purest mountain stream.

All around him, the dirty, slushy snow that piled up near the walls and in the corners of the street began to shift and flow, melting under the pressure of Hauke's power and following patterns inscribed into the Runic Blade of Eternal Ice by the Frost Architect Eraric himself.

"Stop him!" Sir Thorryn cried in horror as he realized that the pair of figures who seemed to have no intention of joining the battle in the plaza were performing witchcraft with a far more sinister purpose than simply joining the slaughter.

He had no idea what sort of demon the shaggy, horned beast was, but he could feel something impossibly old echoing from its words and the blade in his hand, shining with cold light like a frozen star within its depths, was surely the creation of dark, twisted magic.

"Spears!" Thorryn shouted as he realized that the only archers under his command had all been called up to the walls. "Hurl your spears!"

Hauke's sorcery was still only half complete, and the shimmering, wavering curtains of water that he placed to either side of the West Gate had yet to take their final form when a quartet of long spears came sailing through the air, passing effortlessly through the shimmering water as they descended toward Hauke's focused, unmoving figure.

-CRACK- -CRACK- -CRACK- -CRACK

The whip in Heila's hand lashed out at the flying spears, stretching for more than five paces to strike each spear in turn and delivering a powerful enough blow to not only deflect the falling spears, but snap them completely in half!

Sir Thorryn's men stared in open-mouthed shock as the broken pieces of their spear clattered off the cobblestones of the plaza before a warm surge of fear that trickled down their pants reminded them to run back behind the barricade even though they were already convinced the wooden tables offered protection that was worse than useless.

Behind them, even Sir Thorryn wanted to turn and run... He was just a simple knight, tasked with the protection of a single village. What in the name of the Holy Lord of Light was he doing facing off against demons like these? And how was he supposed to survive this nightmare?

#### Chapter 940: Four vs. Two (Part One)

Lord Jalal knew that he wasn't a great warrior compared to the champions of the Vale of Mists or even the Golden Maned Children of Destiny who roamed the Southern Steppe. Airgead Mountain had never sought great power, nor had it built the sort of coalitions that gave rise to warriors like the gladiator beside him, who had fought against warriors from at least a dozen clans.

Whether a person derided them as lazy or praised them for their artistry, one thing everyone agreed on was that Airgead Mountain depended on its neighbors for protection from the humans, and they were lucky that the mountains beyond their home were too inhospitable for any but a few remote bands of outcasts to call home.

But Jalal still held his pride as a warrior, and he'd fought more than a dozen challenges over the years to retain his throne instead of sitting idly upon it like so many before him had done. He dedicated his life to Stargazing, and he followed the trail blazed by the First Warrior, even when it seemed like fewer and fewer people in his clan did with each passing year.

"Wisdom of the First Warrior," he said as he dashed across the snow. "Guide my blades true."

The sorcery of Stargazers was among the hardest to learn. For a Frost Walker like Hauke to grasp the idea that water flowed and ice froze was common sense. Using his energy to bend nature to his will was almost second nature.

Jalal's sorcery was different. He invoked the legends of the First Warrior, not as a prayer, but to infuse himself with the fabled powers of the warrior who taught the Eldritch people what it meant to fight with all of your strength, your heart, your senses, and your will. To fight for what truly mattered in this world while the things that were trivial or unimportant passed beneath your notice.

In order to fight against two of humanity's sacred warriors, Jalal conjured up an image of an ancient, venerable warrior with eyes so keen they could see the swing of a man's sword before it began to move and ears so sharp they could tell which way he would turn from the crunch of his boots in the snow. It

was the ability to read even the slightest hint of your opponent's actions and respond to them before they'd even made their move.

Now, his eyes sparkled with the reflected light of the stars above and Hauke's blue and green shimmering banners of light and his thin lips pulled into a predatory grin as he dashed toward the men in polished armor and gleaming tabards who defiled Dame Sybyll's duel by using their sorcery to heal the Templar with a glowing blade.

"Come, men in metal!" Jalal taunted in the language of the humans as he drew his most treasured blades, forged of precious, glittering Star Metal, and took a fighting stance. "Come and dance with death!"

"The Cat Lord!" Sarbil, one of the Templars, cried as he drew his blessed longsword. The blade immediately began to glow with pale golden radiance, matching the other three Templars as they fell into a disciplined formation, like the arc of an axe blade with each man protecting the one to his left and forming a shield before the ranks of the Temple Guard behind them. "Brothers, stand together as one! This is the demon that rules Airgead Mountain!"

Unlike the common soldiers cowering behind their barricades, most of whom spent at least half their year as farmers tending to their crops or their herds, these men had spent years training specifically to fight against demons.

Their shields bore not only the raised emblem of a shining Holy Sword, but sacred inscriptions that were said to defend against demonic arts that could ensnare the heart and confuse the mind. Their armor had been crafted for each of them individually, custom fitted at great expense and mended after every battle they fought against the demons in the wilderness so that it always gleamed as if it were new.

"Sarbil, Godfrey, pin down the Cat Lord, don't let him escape! Ibar, hold back to aid them with prayer," Templar Aldric, the most senior among the Templars, commanded as he took several steps back to study the demon who was almost as legendary as the Crimson Knight.

There was something disturbingly familiar about the feeling that clung to the cat's body, as if the sacred symbol of the Ascended Swordsman across its chest was more than just a profane decoration and the implications of that realization shook Aldric to the core.

"Don't ignore me!" Kurtz shouted, bounding forward with a speed that he could never have managed before he tasted Sybyll's blood. His cloven hooves struck the cobblestones beneath the snow hard enough to crack the stones as he leaped high into the air, twisting his body as if he intended to crash horns-first into the startled Templars.

"Cover!" The Templar named Ibar called as he raised his shield up high and prepared to thrust upward with his blade as soon as the foolish horned soldier collided with his shield.

Kurtz, however, was no fool. He knew how to put on a good show and his acrobatic fighting style was one that had dazzled crowds of thousands in the arena of High Fen City. Even though he'd slowed a bit in the years since he became a father to Emmie, with the power of Sybyll's blood surging through his body, he was in better than top form and he pushed himself to the limits.

Ibar grinned behind the visor of his helm, anticipating the shock to his shield when the weight of the horned demon would batter him like a stubborn goat. He had only a moment to adjust his stance, resting the edge of his blade against the rim of his shield and bending his knees in preparation for a counter-thrust as soon as he felt the impact, but nothing could have prepared him for what the demon actually did.

Kurtz tucked his head and rolled mid-air, flipping himself over and curling into a ball before kicking out explosively with his cloven hooves. The force of his blow combined all of his weight along with the unnatural strength of a vampire every bit as powerful as Savis or Tausau, and all of that force landed squarely in the center of Ibar's shield, punching downward with the force of a small battering ram.

-CRACK-

The sound of a shield breaking filled the air, drawing gasps of surprise and reluctant admiration from the soldiers hunkered behind their improvised barriers. Meanwhile, Kurtz rebounded off the shield, flipping over in the air once again before he landed back on the ground, having returned almost exactly to the spot where he started as he flashed his most dazzling smile at the Templar with the broken shield.

There was only dirty snow and hard cobblestone beneath his hooves, not the hallowed sands of the arena floor, but Kurtz didn't care. A Champion of the Arena stood upon the cobbles of the plaza, and the humans were about to learn why a warrior who stood only half the height of his Templar foes was considered every bit as much of a giant as the Tuscans outside the walls!