

# The Vampire 941

## Chapter 941: Four vs. Two (Part Two)

"Come, come! Four of you, two of us!" Kurtz laughed, the sound unnaturally loud and wild as Sybyll's potent blood surged through his veins like liquid fire. He could feel strength beyond anything he'd ever experienced, speed that made his arena victories seem sluggish by comparison. The watching soldiers felt like his audience again, and he was going to give them a show they'd never forget.

"Ten tails of gold if you can knock me down!" he taunted, spinning his short sword in a series of elaborate flourishes that would have brought cheers from the crowd in High Fen City. But as he showed off, Templar Ibar hurled the broken remains of his shield directly at Kurtz's face, following right behind the broken scraps of wood and steel with a perfect thrust backed by the full weight and power of his body.

Kurtz barely managed to twist aside in time to avoid a lethal blow and the blessed blade sliced cleanly through his blue and green harlequin patterned gambeson, drawing a line of blood across his ribs. The wound should have been a light scratch that Kurtz would have laughed off even if his head wasn't clouded by the power of Sybyll's blood, but this time, something unexpected happened.

A vampire's power was a double edged sword, and while Sybyll's potent blood offered Kurtz tremendous power and speed, it also made him vulnerable to the sacred energy that flowed along the blades of the Templars. The cut that wasn't deep enough to need a healer's stitching suddenly burned as if he'd been struck with a white hot brand and for a moment, Kurtz entire world went blurry and turned upside down as the blood within his veins steamed as it spilled from his wound.

Two agonizing heartbeats later, Templar Aldric's shield rim crashed into Kurtz's horns, snapping his head back and sending him staggering several steps away before he was able to bring his buckler in line to deflect the veteran Templar's follow up sword swing.

-CLANG-

The force of the blow sent shivers up Kurtz arm, shaking him free from the fog of pain and delivering the most important lesson of the evening. This was not the arena. The soldiers were not his audience and his opponents... no, his enemies, were not putting on a show.

And if he didn't take the fight as seriously as a duel to the death... Then Emmie would lose a father, and it would be his fault for forgetting where he was.

"All right then," Kurtz said as he began to hop from foot to foot as he eyed the templars. His blade cut lazy figure eights in the air in front of him as he prepared to make his move, but this time he wasn't playing for the crowd, he was obscuring his intentions as he began to bait the pair of Templars, revealing openings he wanted them to see in order to draw them to positions he was preparing to attack.

"A dance with death, right Jalal?" Kurtz called without taking his eyes off the Templars. "Then let's dance!"

"To think I would dance with such a partner," Jalal laughed, spinning artfully as he skillfully deflected one Templar blade toward the other man attacking him. Every time he moved, he kept forcing the men to get in each other's way, only stepping forward when one of the two was at least partially behind the other and retreating any time they separated enough to threaten him from two sides at once.

The initial shock didn't last long, however, and the Templars quickly changed their strategy, spreading out as much as they could and alternating between them, one to attack, the other to defend, putting constant pressure on the dancing lord and the prancing gladiator.

As the shock of facing off against such a legendary demon faded away, Sarbil advanced with growing confidence, swinging again and again as his longsword's greater reach forced Jalal to remain well beyond the effective range of his curved knives. Each time he swung, the tip or edge of his blade drew closer to the demon's dark fur and resplendent, gem encrusted tunic, until several shallow cuts decorated Jalal's arms and legs as he barely managed to deflect what would have been killing blows toward less lethal targets.

More than simply struggling when he defended himself, however, every time the Eldritch Lord tried to close distance, the Templar's shield would snap forward in a practiced shield bash while his sword swept in deadly arcs that kept Jalal dancing backward, leaving the Templar without so much as a single wound as the fight dragged on.

"You profane the glory of the Ascended Swordsman," Sarbil roared as he pressed his advantage, his blade growing brighter with his zealous fury at seeing a sacred icon on the chest of the demon. "You insult his honor with your... AAAAAAARRRRHHHH"

A fierce grin appeared on Jalal's thin lips as the Templar finally fell into his trap, over-extending his sword thrust in his obsession to remove the image of the sacred constellation from Jalal's chest.

The Star Metal blades in Jalal's hands glittered as they danced, tinging lightly off the metal of Sarbil's bracer as their points slid toward the gaps in the armor. The point of one blade slid between the mail of Sarbil's hauberk and his gauntlet, slicing into his soft, vulnerable wrist and piercing deeply, sliding between the bones of the wrist as it cut before Jalal twisted fiercely, releasing a fountain of hot blood that splattered across the Templar's gleaming white tabard and the snow at his feet.

The blade in Jalal's other hand skittered across the polished metal of Sarbil's vambrace, sliding point first along his extended arm until it found the gap at the armpit and splitting the links of chain mail with the force of his blow until he buried the curved weapon to the hilt in the other man's chest.

"DEMON!" Godfrey shouted as he rushed forward with a heavy overhand swing, intending to split the Cat Lord's head in two while its blades were caught in Sarbil's body.

In a flicker of starlight, the Eldritch Lord danced away, narrowly avoiding the furious blow and leaving his treasured blades behind as the Templar staggered in the snow, falling to his knees as frothy, pinkish blood spilled from his lips and leaked from his helm.

For a moment, the soldiers watching stood numb and mute, unable to believe what they had just seen, but the shock of Sarbil's death was nothing compared to what they felt moments later when an even greater tragedy unfolded...

## Chapter 942: Hollow Faith

Sir Tommin barely noticed the moment that Jalal and Kurtz stormed into the plaza to attack the Templars who had been providing him with support during the battle.

He was locked in a contest of strength and will with the Crimson Knight, the haft of her darksteel axe pressed firmly against the crossguard of his holy light blade, and their helms pressed together, visor to visor, as he stared into her crimson eyes through the narrow slits in his helm.

"What has Owain done to my family?" Tommin asked as the blade in his hand began to flicker and pulse with the fear and anxiety that clawed at his heart. "Tell me, demon!"

"Where do ye think he found tha Nightweaver Venom ta poison yer family with?" Sybyll taunted as she dug her heels into the ground, pressing forward against Sir Tommin hard enough to force him to take half a step back as she exploited the single greatest gap in the armor around his heart.

"Yer lord bought tha venom from a vampire," Sybyll taunted him. At the same time, as soon as Tommin pressed back against her, she yielded entirely, sweeping the butt end of her axe low between Tommin's legs and twisting to the side as she scooped him off the ground. The strength of her blood surged as the light of Tommin's blade faltered, and she used every extra bit of that strength to toss the armored templar like a log, flipping him end-over-end and dropping him solidly on his back three paces away from her.

Tommin crashed onto the cobblestones in a clatter of armor, barely maintaining his grip on his sword as he coughed and sputtered from the force of the impact. Desperately, he rolled to the side, scrambling through the snow just in time to avoid the powerful, overhand blow of Sybyll's axe that cleaved through the cobblestones and deep into the soil below.

-CLANG!- -CRUNCH!-

Tommin had only managed to rise to one knee before Sybyll's axe slammed into his glowing blade again, but this time, as soon as she'd battered the blade out of her way, she followed up with a powerful kick to the center of Tommin's breastplate, tearing through the emblem of a Holy Sword upon his chest as her armored boot caved in a portion of the the Templar's armor.

"Yer about ta die, Sir Tommin," Sybyll said as she stalked toward the struggling knight. "Ye'll die and yer wife an' child will be left ta tha 'demons' ta take care of," she said with a dark smile behind the grinning skull of her visor.

"Do ye' want me ta save them?" Sybyll asked, holding herself back as she waited for the battered Templar to regain his footing. She could feel the cracks in his emotional armor growing even greater than the ones in his physical armor, and she pressed forward with her verbal attacks even more relentlessly than she had with her axe.

"A vampire canna' die from Owain's poison," she pointed out. "Tonnis wouldn'a age another day, but I'd teach him fer ye, raise him up to be a true knight an' champion o' tha Vale of Mists," she offered.

"YOU KEEP HIS NAME OFF YOUR LIPS!" Tommin roared as the sword in his hand flared with the brightest light it had since the battle began. In a rush, he charged forward, swinging with the strength and fury of a madman as his vision narrowed, seeing nothing but the unholy figure of the Crimson Knight before him.

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

"YOU. LEAVE. THEM. ALONE!" Tommin shouted as he swung furiously at the wicked woman, abandoning all technique in order to batter her with pure, righteous fury.

For a moment, Sybyll gave ground, struggling to defend herself against the renewed assault as brilliant white light stabbed at her eyes through the holes in her visor. But even though the light was brighter, the faith that created it was far more brittle than it had been, and the pain that enveloped her face paled in comparison to what it had been when her fight began.

"Admit it, 'Sir' Tommin," Sybyll mocked even as she gave ground. "Yer' not fit ta be a father an ye' need tha 'demons' ta save yer wife an' child. I'll take 'good care' of yer' Rosie too," she added, wishing that the knight could see the practiced, lecherous expression on her face that had driven many a man mad with desire beneath the sheets. "Since ye' can'a please her yerself anymore..."

"SHUT YOUR MOUTH, YOU DEMON!" Tommin roared, now completely oblivious to the escalating battle around him. Sarbil, one of the men who had inducted him into the Order of Holy Light and stood with him when he took his oaths as a Templar, was sputtering and dying not twenty paces away from him, and Tommin was completely oblivious as nothing mattered more to him than destroying the unholy woman in front of him.

-CLANG- -CLANG- -CRUNCH!-

Tommin's swings had become wild and predictable, and Sybyll led him easily into an over-extended position before lashing out with the blade of her axe in a wide, sweeping cut that slammed into the center of his breastplate. Metal twisted and deformed, and were it not for the blessings of the High Priest who had supervised the armor's construction, it would have torn in two under the strength of her blow.

-CLATTER- -CLATTER-

Tommin fell to the ground several paces away from Sybyll's imposing figure, rolling over the cobbles before he finally came to a stop less than a dozen paces from the temple guard. A few men surged forward, ready to pull the battered knight into their ranks and defend him to the last man, only to falter and stay their hands when they felt the growing aura of menace radiating from the Crimson Knight as she stalked forward, dragging her heavy axe along the ground and filling the air with the sound of honed steel grinding against stone.

-THUMP- -THUMP- -THUMP- -THUMP- -THUMP-

The sound of dozens of booted feet marching into the plaza felt like the beating of a monstrous heart as Captain Ultrech's soldiers arrived at last, signalling the arrival of an even more brutal phase of the assault on Hanrahan town.

"Yer out of time, Sir Tommin," Dame Sybyll said as she stopped her advance several paces short of reaching the wounded Templar as he struggled to regain his feet. "An' so am I. Drop yer sword an' surrender yer men an' we will spare yer lives," she offered as she raised the blade of her axe up high.

"We. Will. Never. Surrender. To demons!" Tommin spat as he clung to the hilt of his sword, wedging the tip of the blade into the stones at his feet in order to pull himself back up. Slowly, painfully, struggling against the sharp pains of cracked and broken ribs in his chest, he forced his battered, protesting body to stand, raising the glowing Holy Light Blade before him in a low, defensive guard.

"If I fall, another will rise," Tommin promised as he prepared to make his final stand. "If they fall, another will take their place! So long as the sun rises in the east, the faithful will never submit to your evil," he swore.

"I will stop you here," he added as he took a slow, deliberate step forward. "You will not kill these men. You will not touch my family," he said as the blade in his hands glowed brighter and brighter as he wrapped his heart in layer after layer of the armor of faith. "The Holy Lord of Light will..."

"No, he won't," Sybyll interrupted as an aura of darkness spilled from the blade of her axe, blanketing the entire plaza with the dark stillness of the grave, interrupting even the intense duels of Kurtz and Lord Jalal as the faint cries of thousands of mournful fallen soldiers filled the air.

Behind her visor, darkness flowed across the whites of Sybyll's eyes, covering her crimson irises and flooding her vision with a layer of shadow as she stared deep into the Abyss that lay beyond the end of life.

"Kiss of the Void. Hollow Faith," Sybyll said in a voice that echoed from the infinite distance beyond the end of life, filling the courtyard with the sound of her pronouncement as she brought her ax down, unleashing a wave of darkness that enveloped the defiant Templar like an unholy shroud.

As much as Sybyll had wanted to crush Tommin with her own strength and drag his broken body back to Lady Ashlynn as a gift, she couldn't delay any longer. She had come for more important things than a battle with a Templar, and the time had come to end this pointless battle.

Opposite her, the darkness that enveloped Tommin flickered and danced like the flame of a bonfire before the blazing light of his Holy Light Blade grew so bright that it snuffed out the darkness, banishing every trace of the haunting energy.

But the blade didn't stop there. It grew brighter and brighter, blazing like the rising sun in Tommin's hands. Only, for the first time since Tommin had laid hands on the weapon, its light wasn't fueled by the strength of his devotion and faith... but by the aching, endless void where that faith had once been.

"AAAAAARRRRRRGGGG!" Tommin screamed as the Holy Light of his sword seared in his eyes. Smoke rose from his visor as flesh burned and blackened under the intensity of the light. For a moment, he could see nothing but pure, holy radiance, blotting out the world until the darkness crept in from the edges of his vision.

Two heartbeats later, the sword fell from his limp fingers, its light fading to nothing more than the bright glow of polished steel as it clattered off the cobblestones. For Tommin, it was the last thing he would ever see as the Holy Blade of Light deemed his faith hollow, unworthy, and punished him for his failings by stripping all the light of the world away from his eyes, leaving behind a blinded, hollowed-out husk of a man where a paragon of virtue once stood.

"Now," Sybyll said, pointing her ax at the horrified Temple Guard as the forces of her army filled the plaza behind her. "Will ye surrender? Or die?"

## Chapter 943: Rejection

"Will ye surrender? Or die?"

Sybyll addressed herself to the Temple Guard, who shrank back from the writhing, sobbing figure of Sir Tommin, as if they were afraid that they would be infected by the darkness that tormented him and caused his Holy Light Blade to turn against him. But when she spoke, her voice was loud enough to resound off the town walls and carry across Hanrahan town, all the way to the keep where she suspected Ian Hanrahan was still cowering behind his fortress walls.

Around the plaza and even on the town walls, the fighting stopped as the Eldritch forces withdrew at least a few paces from their opponents, stopping mid-assault to give the humans a chance to accept Dame Sybyll's terms.

In the Eldritch way, the greatest warriors of either side had just fought a duel for supremacy, and the victor couldn't be clearer. Everyone in the Second Army was clear on the fact that the greatest combatant the humans had to offer was the Templar with the Holy Light Blade. Now that he had been defeated, there was no one left who could stop Dame Sybyll from slaughtering every last soldier in town.

Since no one could stop her, it was the height of foolishness to throw lives away for nothing, and the Eldritch people learned this in nursery rhymes about the First Warrior. After all, the tradition of duels and challenges fought between the strongest for control of a nation, as well as the responsibility of the victor to care for the defeated, was a tradition that had preserved the lives of Eldritch Clans who would have otherwise slaughtered each other for thousands of years.

But humans were notoriously stubborn, and Lord Jalal refused to relax, even though their defeat should have been obvious to everyone present. The Church, especially, wasn't one to accept defeat easily, and with so many of their Templars and Temple Guard present, he feared they would do something... drastic.

While everyone hesitated, Hauke quietly completed his sorcery, transforming sheets of flowing, melted snow into solid walls of thick, crystal-clear ice, complete with narrow slits for archers to fire through in the same style as the walls favored by the human defenders.

The greatest difference between the walls of ice shaped by Hauke's sorcery and the ones designed by humans was the inclusions of slopes, curves, and angles, each designed to deflect force away from a

defender or funnel a surge of avalanche-like force harmlessly around the wall instead of resisting it directly.

The walls weren't something of Hauke's own design, but a sophisticated work of engineering created by the Frost Architect Eraric and embedded in the Runic Blade of Eternal Ice. On any other occasion, the young Frost Walker lord would have immediately begun to study the frozen structure, learning everything he could from the mentor who had left behind the sword as a final, complicated legacy. Now, however, he sighed in relief that there was a layer of protection between the soldiers of Sybyll's army and the ranks of human soldiers arrayed against them.

The sound of crystalline ice forming and the sudden emergence of a pair of fortified walls defending the invading army seemed to startle the defenders out of their stupor as the various leaders among the Hanrahan forces realized that the fighting could resume at any minute if they didn't respond to Sybyll's surrender demand.

"Don't listen to the words of this demon!" Templar Aldric shouted as he raised his faintly glowing sword up high. He'd already lost one brother to the Cat Lord, and even though Sir Tommin wasn't dead, from his anguished sobs, the blinded Templar likely wished that he was. To any other man, it would have been obvious that surrender was the only possible answer if he wished to preserve his life.

But Templars weren't ordinary men, and their oaths and devotion to the ideals of the Holy Lord of Light were more important than their meager lives. If they died fighting to the last man, then their swords would have carved open their path to the Heavenly Shores, but if they forsook their ways and made peace with demons, then their souls were sure to be damned to a life of suffering when they were reborn.

To Aldric, his fellow Templars, and the men of the Temple Guard, it wasn't a choice between surrender and death, it was a choice between a glorious afterlife and several lifetimes of suffering until they could atone for the sin of surrender.

"If you listen to her," Aldric continued in a voice that grew stronger and more confident the longer he spoke. "If you listen to her, then you're little better than a heretic! The Church will remember you for your cowardice, and it will hunt you down for your betrayal," he threatened.

"But, but we can't fight them!" Sir Niall cried, pointing with a finger that shook and trembled. He felt less knightly than he had since the day he'd watched his father burn on the pyre, but he didn't care. Like a foolish schoolboy, he'd sworn to uphold the virtue of Truth, and he spoke the truth as he saw it now.

"We aren't real soldiers," Sir Niall protested as he looked at the men who had come from his village, wearing armor and carrying weapons that they had never used against anything more threatening than a band of horse thieves. "My men have farms to go home to. And wives and children, some of them," he added as he thought of the charming young woman he'd spent the evening with in the hopes that she might come home to his village with him when this was all over.

"If we, if we surrender," the young knight asked in a wavering voice. "Can we just go home? We won't take sides between you and Baron Hanrahan," he added, hanging his mace on a loop at his waist and holding up his hands. "We'll just go home to our village until this is all over."

"You think she'll stop here?" Sir Thorryn shouted from the opposite side of the plaza. "We all stand together! Villager and Templar, Hanrahan and Lothian, and we have a chance to stop this evil from destroying our homes. They already attacked the caravans, what makes you think they won't come for you in your village next?" the veteran knight asked.

Before either the youthful Sir Niall or Dame Sybyll could respond to Thorryn's call for solidarity among the defenders in repelling the demons, one of Hanrahan Town's defenders made their decision for everyone, because it had always been their decision to make.

Lord Jalal felt his fur stand on end, and every instinct within his body screamed that he needed to be somewhere else, anywhere but the spot where he currently stood. Feline reflexes twisted his body as he searched for the source of the deeply ominous feeling an instant before a blinding white light consumed his world, followed by burning, tearing pain.

From high atop Hanrahan Keep, an arrow formed of pure, radiant starlight streaked through the night. There was no whistling of wind or any other sound to mark its passage, and most of the people gathered in the plaza never even saw it coming. Among the defenders, only the Templars had a brief inkling of the arrival of a power so sacred that it cleansed their hearts of doubts and reminded them of the tremendous power of the Holy Lord of Light above to aid them in their fight against demons.

Among Dame Sybyll's forces, Heila was the most sensitive to the flow of mystic energy in the air but the arrow of light moved too swiftly for her to respond to it, and even Sybyll herself was still too weakened by her confrontation with Sir Tommin and his Holy light blade to do more than watch in horror as the arrow of light tore into her closest friend from Airgead mountain, enveloping him in a flash of light as Loman Lothian finally made his move...

## Chapter 944: Like An Arrow From a Bow

High above the thatched rooftops of Hanrahan Town, Loman Lothian stood atop the westernmost tower of Hanrahan keep, lowering the glittering Bow of Stars before he collapsed to one knee, taking shelter behind the stone parapets before the demons could retaliate against him and trembling with exertion from unleashing his Arrow of Judgment.

"Disciple Loman!"

"Disciple!"

Two of the twelve acolytes who had joined Loman atop the tower to serve as 'arrows' in his 'quiver' rushed forward to support the black-robed Disciple before he completely collapsed from the exertion of unleashing such a powerful manifestation of the Holy Lord of Light's judgment on the demons below.

"Thank you," Loman said as he took the hands of one of the acolytes and leaned against him for support without trying to stand. His heart hammered in his chest, and his arms felt like they were towels that had been thoroughly wrung out after washing, squeezed of every last drop of strength they held when he unleashed the Arrow of Judgment.

When he looked at the faces of the two men who had come to his aid, however, he realized that the toll the arrow had taken on him paled in comparison to what it demanded of the men who filled his quiver. Both of them were among the youngest acolytes to answer the call, little more than boys who had yet to enter their twenties.

Now, however, in the dancing light of the bonfire burning at the center of the flat-topped tower, both men looked like they had been weathered by the years. The softness of youth had vanished from their faces, leaving behind skin that was slightly sunken and faces that looked gaunt enough to suggest they hadn't eaten well in some time, even though Acolytes of the Church enjoyed richer diets than almost any common man in Hanrahan town.

"Thank you," Loman repeated more solemnly as he realized what these men of faith had sacrificed in order to help him strike down one of the great Demon Lords that plagued the Frontier.

For generations, his family had struggled to unseat any of the powerful lords that ruled the demon kingdoms that bordered Lothian March, but now, finally, one of them had fallen. It should have been a

moment filled with cheers and jubilation, but instead, a ball of ice seemed to have formed in Loman's chest where his stomach should be as he panned his gaze around the tower, looking at the rest of the acolytes who had given their prayers and their faith to support him in this hour of peril.

"Call out for me," Loman said when he realized that only eight of the twelve men, including the two who were supporting him, were still standing. "The battle isn't over yet. Are you able to stand with me again?"

"I can stand," one of the standing acolytes said quickly, stepping forward into the light of the bonfire and bowing deeply to the Holy Disciple of the Ascended Archer. "Speak the words, your Worship, and I will lend my voice."

"I can stand..."

"I can stand..."

More and more voices spoke up, including two men who had been sitting on the stone floor, leaning up against the parapet wall for support until Loman called on them to call out. Two other voices, however, said nothing at all.

"Brother Usic and Brother Neso have passed on from this life, your Worship," an acolyte named Matthias said in a voice that trembled with weakness that hadn't been there when he climbed the stairs of the tower. The old acolyte had served the temple for nearly thirty years, and Loman could see the profound grief in his weathered face as he gestured toward the pair of unmoving figures, wrapped in their white robes as though they were funeral shrouds.

Acolyte Usic had been even older, beginning his life in the Temple as a young boy and serving faithfully for longer than Matthias had been alive. When Head Priest Germot asked for volunteers, Usic was the first to step forward, claiming that at his age, he was grateful that he could finally offer something more to the Church than sweeping its floors and polishing its icons.

Now, the old man lay crumpled against the stone parapet, his aged features looking incomparably ancient and weathered. At the same time, the expression on his face was one of peace, as if he had found contentment in the final moments of his life before Loman's Arrow of Judgment burned up the last of his life.

Beside him, Acolyte Neso, who had been boasting just the other day that he would be visiting his brother's family to see the latest baby in a long line of nieces and nephews, stared sightlessly at the town beyond the walls.

At the end, the old uncle didn't die facing east in the direction of the rising sun or facing west in the direction of the setting sun and the Heavenly Shores. Instead, he gazed longingly toward the cramped family home he had left behind more than twenty years ago, when there were too many mouths to feed and he was old enough to lessen his parents' burden by entering the Church.

"I see," Loman said, lowering his head and closing his eyes for a moment of silent prayer. He knew that he would be asking a great deal of these men, but he never imagined that his prayers would claim their lives so soon in the battle, and the sacrifice the Holy Lord of Light demanded for giving them the strength to fight the demons was only going to grow from here.

"We will have to thank them for their sacrifice when we meet them on the Heavenly Shores," Loman said, drawing a deep breath as he opened his eyes to look at the Acolytes who were supporting him. Exemplar Domas had warned him this day may come, and that men with weak faith and poor resolve may not survive the tests of the Holy Lord of Light when they joined their hearts in prayer to one of the paragons of the Church.

Now, two of his 'arrows' lay broken like brittle twigs, and the rest of the men gathered around him already felt like they were teetering on the brink. Even Loman's faith wavered as he second-guessed his decision to strike at the Cat Lord rather than the Crimson Knight.

Silently, he castigated himself for doubting whether or not the arrow from his Bow of Stars could truly penetrate the Crimson Knight's demonic armor to threaten the creature of darkness within. In his moment of uncertainty, he had shifted his aim to a lesser target, and he consumed two lives in order to take his shot. Now, with only ten arrows remaining in his quiver, he couldn't help but wonder if it would be enough to put a stop to the demon's assault.

"The battle isn't won yet," Loman said, clenching his fist tightly as he firmed up his resolve to do what must be done. "Even though we've struck a heavy blow for the Light, we still have more to do. Help me stand," he commanded. "I need to see what's happening."

Most men wouldn't be able to see much detail at such a great distance without using a tool like Baron Hanrahan's perspective glass. Loman's eyes, however, glittered with the starlight of the Ascended Archer's blessing. There wasn't a single place within all of Hanrahan Town that he couldn't see clearly enough to pick out his targets, nor was there anywhere within the town's walls that he couldn't reach with the arrows of his Bow of Stars.

When he looked down upon the west gate plaza, however, his blood ran cold as he realized the carnage that his attack had provoked. But once an arrow was fired from a bow, there was no time for second thoughts or regrets; a man could never snatch the arrow back, no matter how much he might wish to.

And even if he could have made the decision again, Loman would still have loosed his Arrow of Judgment. A price had to be paid in order to stop the demons here and now, and no matter how high that price was, even if it required the lives of every soldier and priest in Hanrahan town and more... He was willing to pay it.

Chapter 945: Life, or Death?

"JALAL!"

Sybyll's outraged cry at the sudden attack on Lord Jalal was so loud that the buildings shook, shedding sheets of snow that had piled up on their roofs and forcing many of those in the west gate plaza to cover their ears in pain.

The Crimson Knight moved faster than she'd ever moved before, even though she was far too late to stop the arrow from reaching Jalal, and when the blinding light of the attack finally faded, it revealed the kneeling figure of the vampire knight cradling the limp and bloodied body of the famed Cat Lord of Airgead Mountain.

Her armor smoked and smoldered where it had come in contact with the fading energies of Loman Lothian's attack, but Sybyll hardly noticed as she focused on the sound of the heartbeat in Jalal's chest, strong and rhythmic, like the beat of a drum but all too fast as it pumped hot red blood out of his body.

A single heartbeat of premonition of danger had been all the warning Jalal had to move aside, but it had been enough to preserve his life, at least for a few moments. Instead of piercing his chest, Loman's 'Arrow of Judgment' had struck Jalal's left arm, treating through fur, skin, sinew, muscle and bone with the ease of cutting through parchment.

On the snow nearby, Jalal's left hand still clutched one of his backup blades, but the hand ended abruptly where it should have met the wrist. Similarly, the flesh and bone below his shoulder had been torn away, leaving behind little more than the ball of the upper arm in the socket of his shoulder.

The remainder of the arm itself, from shoulder to wrist, was simply gone, burned away in the light of Loman's sorcery. The wound was among the most severe Sybyll had ever seen inflicted by human sorcery, and it had not confined itself to simply tearing away her friend's arm. His chest and left side were covered with dozens of shallow cuts, each of which smoked and smoldered as if he'd been raked by saw blades pulled straight from the fires of a forge and the putrid smell of singed fur and flesh filled the air.

"Heila! Hauke!" Sybyll shouted as blood surged within her body. Rage and hatred were words, but they felt pale and empty compared to the roiling, seething fire that burned within her chest as she saw the state the proud warrior had been reduced to.

"Too loud," Jalal said in a feeble, strained voice as he struggled to focus his cloudy vision on the armored figure who held him. "Didn't I tell you that your voice was meant for singing with the drummers? Why are you shouting so much," he said as he tried to reach out to touch the visor of her helm, only to frown in confusion when his left arm refused to obey him.

"Shut up, ye stupid cat," Sybyll said as a hot, pale pink tear slid down her burned and blistered cheek. "Ye smell like a snack, don't tempt me ta bite ye," she said before turning away from him to look at Heila.

The diminutive witch dashed across the plaza as quickly as she could, skidding to a stop beside the wounded Eldritch Lord. Her eyes trembled as they swept over Jalal's body, taking in the myriad of smaller wounds along with the ghastly, mangled ruin where his left arm had once been, but even as her eyes shook, her fingers moved with swift, steady motions as she reached into the inner pockets of her long, leather jacket to produce a small porcelain bottle.

"This will hurt, but it will stop the bleeding," Heila said in a voice that was cold and leached of emotion as she schooled her features into a healer's mask that rivaled Lady Nyrielle's blankest of expressions. "There is no shame in screaming..."

Heila gave the wounded lord no time to prepare himself before she pried the cork stopper of the bottle free and scattered a dark green and ocher powder over his wounds. As soon as the dust touched bleeding flesh, there was a faint hiss, followed by a violent twitching as the torn skin and shattered bone seemed to shrivel up on themselves.

"YEEEEEEEEOOOWWWLLLL!"

Even if Heila hadn't given him permission to scream, Jalal would have howled like a young kitten pining for the loss of his first love as Heila's witchcraft worked away at his flesh, cinching it tight until blood no longer flowed. He felt like someone was kneading his wounds like dough, squeezing and tormenting him until the edges of his vision grew fuzzy and the sounds of the world felt distant, but after the moment of intense pain, he felt only cool, soothing relief.

"Will he live?" Sybyll asked flatly as she forced herself to remain perfectly still, supporting her friend in her arms while Heila fought to save his life. "Or do I need ta' take him as one o' me progeny ta' save 'im?" Sybyll asked, startling Heila as she realized that the relationship between the Crimson Knight and the Lord of Airgead Mountain must much, much deeper than she'd imagined.

"He'll live, so long as I can take him to the forest for true healing before dawn," Heila promised with a sharp, confident nod as she watched the expression of pain fading from Jalal's face. "The arm is gone forever," she added in a quieter tone. "Even Lady Ashlynn would struggle to restore it like this and by the time we reached her..."

"So long as he lives," Sybyll said as she gently laid Jalal's wounded body on the blood stained snow of the plaza. "Hauke, protect him. Heila, do yer best for him now an' I'll clear away tha rest," Sybyll promised as she stood, turning her furious gaze to the humans around her.

Only a few moments had passed while Sybyll, Heila and Hauke rushed to save the life of the wounded lord but in that time, the Templars had retreated to join the ranks of the Temple Guard with Templar Aldric Exhorting his men to draw their weapons and prepare to charge.

"Lord Loman and the Holy Lord of Light have shown us the way," the veteran templar cried as he held his gleaming sword aloft. His entire body glowed with the strength of his renewed faith as he ignored the fallen Templar, Tommin, to focus on the battle ahead. "Now we must strike! Stop them before they can save their demon lord!"

"Godfrey, take the left column to rally Sir Thorryn's men," Templar Aldric shouted as he organized their counterattack. "Ibar, take the right column and seize command of Sir Niall's men, and if Sir Niall protests and falls to heresy, kill him! Center ranks, follow me! We must finish what Lord Loman started!"

"Don't you dare!" Sybyll spat as she pulled the helm from her head, revealing the burned and blistered face that formed a band across her eyes where the light of Tommin's Holy Light Blade had flowed freely through the slits in her visor.

Between one blink of the eye and the next, Sybyll shot across the plaza, leaving her great ax behind in her haste to reach the Templars as her voice gave rise to the only thought her mind could conjure...

"Kill them all!" Sybyll shouted. "Show them no mercy!"

#### Chapter 946: The Crimson Knight Dances

Sybyll's heart burned with rage and pain as once again, the people who ruled over her home tried to destroy her life and take away the people she held most dear.

Ian Hanrahan murdered her mother and turned her into a rootless wanderer for years until Mistress Nyrielle found her. Thane had reforged the wounded and grieving young woman she had been into a knight with the strength to claim her vengeance, but he and many of Nyrielle's older progeny had withdrawn too much from the world to make her feel like she'd found a new life among the Eldritch.

Zedya had tried, hoping that Sybyll would find some pastime or hobby that made the endless flow of years more bearable, but Sybyll wasn't like Mistress Nyrielle or her handmaid. She didn't care for paints or weaving, needlepoint or poetry. She could tell that each of Nyrielle's progeny found their own way to fill the void that formed in their lives when they were cut off from the human world they'd left behind, but none of those things appealed to her.

It wasn't until the War of Inches broke out and Sybyll moved to live among Jalal's people that her heart came alive again to the beat of drums and the freedom of dance. She had never been noble enough or proper enough, despite her high birth, to appreciate art, but even the most common of drunkards in the seediest of taverns could appreciate fast music and a chance to cut loose, and it had been Jalal who brought her into the wild and carefree world of the Clan of Soft Paws.

It had taken years for the scars on her heart to begin to heal as she filled it up with music and dance, and it had been even more years before she thought of the starry skies and steep slopes of Airgead Mountain as part of her home. She still returned to human lands every winter, wandering the streets of Hanrahan Town or visiting the villages nearby in order to remember the land of her birth, but 'home' had gradually come to mean something larger than Hanrahan Barony or the Vale of Mists.

Now, a Lothian Lord was trying to rip that friend away from her and the Church, which insisted a woman like her would never be fit to sit upon her father's throne, wanted to finish what Loman Lothian had started, killing her friend and stopping her from reclaiming the lands that had been stolen from her father. She couldn't stand it, and she refused to let these men take anything more away from her!

"Dance wit' me, Templars!" Sybyll called as she surrendered herself to the beat of the distant drums and launched herself towards the man who seemed to have taken charge of both the Templars and the Temple Guard. "Dance wit' death!"

Templar Aldric had only a moment to brace himself, setting his sword in a high guard with his blade parallel to the ground at the height of his shoulder before Sybyll knocked his sword aside with a darksteel gauntlet and reached for his throat.

-SCREEEEEEAAAAACHHH-

The sound of metal tearing and crumpling filled the air as the powerful vampire grabbed Aldric by the gorget, crushing the brightly polished armor as though it were a tin cup and using it as a handle to lift the panicked Templar off the ground.

"Show me yer face," Sybyll hissed as her other hand lashed out, grabbing the visor of his helm and ripping it off to reveal the furious, hate-filled gaze of Templar Aldric.

"Die, you unholy creature of the night!" Aldric spat as he swung his sword at the vampire's exposed head. The swing was awkward and lacked power as he lacked anything beyond the strength of his arm, but he could see the burns across her face, and the sight of the wounds inflicted by Templar Tommin gave him hope that he could strike down the terrible demon.

Before the glowing blade could even approach her skin, however, she caught his arm at the forearm and spun him around, moving as if she was dancing with a giant, armored rag-doll. Then, like a child

throwing a tantrum, her fingers crumpled the vambrace protecting his forearm, crushing brightly polished steel into flesh and bone before ripping his arm from his socket, leaving him as limbless as her closest friend.

"AAAAAAARRRRRGGG!" Aldric roared in pain while the temple guards took several steps backwards in horror as they watched the Crimson Knight dismembering yet another of their champions.

Ibar and Godfrey had only begun to charge forward, gleaming swords held high to attack the rampaging Crimson Knight, when she hurled Aldric's screaming figure at Ibar to her left while she flung Aldric's sword like a spear, severed arm and all, at Godfrey on her right.

Ibar and Aldric collapsed to the ground in a clatter of armor and a grizzly fountain of spurting blood that dyed the snow red. Godfrey fared slightly better, batting aside the hurled sword with a parry that was hasty enough and excessive enough to draw scathing criticism from the swordmaster who trained him, but his overreaction to the hurled arm also sealed his doom when Dame Sybyll charged into the opening it created in his guard.

This time, the sharpened claws of her gauntlets tore deeper into the Templar's armor than the polished plates on the surface. She wedged her fingers in between the gorget and his helm, tearing through layers of plate, chain, and padding before wrenching them apart to reveal the throbbing veins of his neck.

"No, no, aaaaaa!!!" Godfrey shouted in horror as he realized that he had suddenly transformed from a sacred knight into a helpless meal in the hands of the crimson-eyed vampire. "Oh Holy Lord of Ligh...." he started to pray before he felt her fangs sink into his neck, bringing a moment of intense pain followed by a blissful, floating sensation as all of his cares, fears and worries fell away in the quiet ecstasy of Sybyll's ravenous sucking at the wound on his neck.

The wounds across her face and body, inflicted by a Holy Light Blade, resisted her every attempt to heal them, even when she gorged herself on the pure, almost sweet blood of the dying templar. It was a lesson learned painfully during the War of Undying Demons when Nyrielle's original progeny took foolish risks with their 'undying' bodies, believing that they could simply gorge themselves on the blood of humans to heal from the wounds they'd been too arrogant to heal.

Now, Dame Sybyll learned that those ancient lessons applied even to her, and that all the might of the Potence of Blood that Nyrielle had bestowed on her was still helpless before the power of the Church's

holy weapons. There was no relief from the pain of her wounds, and the last lingering heat of Sir Tommin's holy light still tormented her body.

So if she couldn't stop the pain by healing her wounds, she decided as she dropped the limp, lifeless body of Templar Godfrey at her feet, then she would drown out the agony with blood and slaughter!

#### Chapter 947: The Jaws of a Wolf

"Kill them all! Show them no mercy!"

Sybyll's order drew an instant response from the forces of the Second Army. By ancient custom, they had all withdrawn when the human's champion fell, and they made no move to stop the human soldiers who pulled their wounded to safety or reorganized their ranks in the tense moments while the human leaders argued about whether or not they should surrender.

Unfortunately, Loman's Arrow of Judgment hadn't just claimed Lord Jalal's arm and nearly his life, it had destroyed the thin veneer of restraint that Lady Heila had put in place before Dame Sybyll awoke at sunset.

"Remember," Lady Heila had told the assembled captains. "Most human soldiers only work for coin. They have no great loyalty to Ian Hanrahan or his sons. The more of them we slay, the harder it will be for Dame Sybyll to rule over her people after she claims her throne, so aim to wound where you can."

"Value your lives above theirs, always," she said when some of the captains looked like they were about to protest. "Kill if you must. But wound when you can. So long as their wounds aren't too severe, I can give them a second chance at life if they accept it," she added.

Much like Ashlynn, she was uncomfortable with the notion of inflicting injuries only to curry favor by offering healing, but if she had learned anything from tending to Sir Carwyn and his men, it was that helping someone recover after the battle transformed their understanding of the battle they had just fought, and the people they fought against.

If Sybyll's forces could sow widespread injuries that incapacitated their foes instead of sowing nothing but death, then Heila would play her part in tending wounded humans as well as the wounded among the Eldritch in the hopes that it would help the people of Hanrahan to accept their new ruler.

So when the Golden Eyed skirmishers and Glass Eyed archers stormed onto the walls, they aimed for debilitating injuries that would only be fatal if a person was left unattended for too long, or was extremely unfortunate. Arrows pierced calves and thighs, knives slashed at weapon hands, and claws snapped bows like kindling, but many humans survived their first skirmish with the Second Army so long as their companions could pull them back away from the front lines.

Loman Lothian's arrow changed that.

"Tear them in two!" Captain Rafal shouted from the top of the walls. "No mercy and allow no retreat!"

The Lupine captain led the charge himself, sprinting along the snow-covered battlements of the town walls.

-PFFFSSSSSEEEEEET-

The sound of an arrow whistling through the air whistled in his ears, but the human archers firing at the Golden Eyed skirmishers were far too disorganized to hold their fire for an organized volley. Perhaps if their commander hadn't been one of the first casualties of the assault on the walls, they would have done better, but Rafal doubted it.

These men were little more than shepherds and woodsmen who put on the armor of warriors to play at being soldiers. Their eyes trembled with fear, and they fired their bows as quickly as their shaking hands would allow, but many shots went wide, and the few that posed any threat were easily dodged or swatted aside by Rafal's nimble troops.

Trained soldiers would have known to drop their bows and draw swords, axes, or even knives when Rafal's men drew close, but these pretenders clutched the long wooden staves of their bows at one end and swung them like unwieldy clubs in a last, futile attempt to save their lives.

Rafal's left hand captured one such bow, yanking the frightened archer off balance half a heartbeat before the point of his knife found its way into the archer's throat. Hot blood spilled across Rafal's face and splattered on the dirty snow below as the human let out a final gurgling scream, but the Lupine commander barely noticed as he was already moving on to the next frightened defender on the wall.

Twenty paces ahead, there were stone steps that would let his men descend from the towering town walls into the streets below, and from there, his men would circle back on the west gate plaza, pinning the defenders who blocked the streets between the Golden Eyed skirmishers on one side and the Iron Tusked heavy infantry on the other.

Like the jaws of a wolf, they would snap up their prey in the middle, but only if Rafal could clear a way to the stairs and circle back before the humans in the streets below realized the danger they were in.

"Get out of our way!" Rafal snarled, wishing he had learned enough of the human's tongue to shout the order in a language they would understand as he confronted a man who had grown large enough to resemble a wine barrel, swinging wildly with a spear and making it impossible for any of Rafal's men to approach him without risking being knocked off the wall.

-PFFFSSEEEET- -PFFFSSEEEET- -PFFFSSEEEET-

Rafal's ears twitched as the sound of several arrows whistling through the air reached his ears moments before half a dozen arrows struck the spear-wielding farmboy, turning him into a pincushion staring at the arrows protruding from his chest and limbs in shock, as if he didn't believe he'd been shot.

"Forward!" Rafal ordered his men as he charged the youth himself, knocking the burly youth from the walls and sending him crashing to the cobblestone streets below while his men pressed forward in their assault.

Already, more than twenty men lay dead and dying on the walls, and there were only one or two Eldritch bodies among the fallen. Now, with less than fifteen paces to go before they reached the stone stairs and the streets below, a predatory smile formed on Rafal's lips...

There was nothing that would stop the jaws of the wolf from snapping closed on their prey. And just as Dame Sybyll had commanded, they would grant them no mercy!

Chapter 948: Sudden Rain

"Kill them all! Show them no mercy!"

Dame Sybyll's anguished order fell on Captain Ultrech's ears like a clap of thunder echoing across the Stoney Moor of his birth. There was fury and pain in that order, and there wasn't a single soldier among Ultrech's men who didn't share in the agony of a homeland that rejected them.

"Formation!" Ultrech shouted, raising his ax high as he stood before his soldiers. "Twin Tusks! Forward! Trample them down!"

In an instant, fifty men moved as one, arranging themselves into two columns two men wide with their strongest warrior at the point of each 'tusk.' It was a movement of precision and focus that even the well-trained soldiers of the Temple Guard would struggle to match because it was born of far more than simple training.

The men under Ultrech's command had once been the personal guard of Porst, Eldritch Lord of the Stoney Moor, and they had known each other for their entire lives. Fifty men shared just over a dozen mothers between them, and from birth, they suckled from the same teats, slept in the same hollows, even courted the same groups of sows.

It was the 'old way', where each litter of squeakers received their lot in life from birth, to be nurtured and raised into their craft from their very youngest of years. The Stoney Moor wasn't an easy place to live, and even the farmers and goatherders needed to be among the best of their trade if they wanted to give the people of the nation a chance to live lives that were better than mere survival.

For generations, men like Ultrech had lived side by side with their littermates in lives that were filled with purpose, and he had been born to serve his lord until he was either too old or too badly wounded to discharge his duties.

All of that had changed when a young hunter named Kirst challenged for the throne and put an end to the old order. The young people of the Stoney Moor wanted freedom in their lives. They wanted the right to choose their trade, to succeed or fail as individuals who weren't bound to their littermates. They wanted a life like the lives lived by people in the High Fen, the Lake of Stars, and beyond.

Ultrech and his fellows were simple men. They marched where they were commanded, fought when they must, and would have defended Eldritch Lord Kirst to their dying breath, but the new Lord of the Stoney Moor didn't see them that way. He saw them as the greatest personification of the 'old ways', and worse, as the only force capable of producing a champion who could topple him from his newly won throne.

And so, rather than accept their service, he exiled every last one of them, along with their sows and any squeakers they were raising to follow in their iron-shod footsteps.

Ultrech's fellows were soldiers. They had been soldiers all their lives. They knew how to survive in the wilderness on the march and how to construct crude camps for the harsh winters in the northern reaches. They refused to simply march to their deaths in exile. But the lives they could build on their own were meager ones, and no man wanted to see his sow sleeping in a soldier's hut night after night.

When word reached them of an Eldritch Lord who was raising an army to fight against invaders from across the sea, Ultrech had taken the opportunity as salvation for his people and their families, decisively leading them south to join this vampire lady in the hopes of proving that he and his men still held value.

Thus far, the reception they'd received in the Vale of Mists had been both a vindication of his decision and an incomparably heavy burden of kindness that the veteran soldier doubted he could ever repay.

Lady Nyrielle demanded their service, their loyalty, and the best of their soldiers. In return, she offered them help in building a village of their own if they wished to live apart from others and keep to their old ways, or a chance to live alongside others in the Vale of Mists in the rapidly growing Vale City or one of the other villages.

Whether they wished to keep their old traditions or not was left entirely up to them. If Ultrech wished to become a village leader, Lady Nyrielle would have supported him. She even offered to send people from other villages to teach their next litters of squeakers how to farm the fertile soil of the Vale, hunt its lush forests, or fill in any of a dozen other gaps in their trades so that his people could have a future where they didn't just live like soldiers in crude huts like an army on the march.

The offer was generous beyond words, and when Ultrech had questioned why an Eldritch Lady would be so kind to people she had only just met who had yet to prove their worth, she gave him the strangest reply.

"My darling Ashlynn would offer as much or more," the powerful vampire said. "So how could I offer any less? If I mistreat your people, I'm certain she would scold me fiercely, and I couldn't bear it, so I could never bear to mistreat you or your kin."

He hadn't understood what Her Eternity meant until he was invited to attend the banquet where she announced her betrothal to the Mother of Trees, but once he saw the famous witch and the way she looked at the ruler of the Vale of Mists, he began to understand why even a powerful vampire like the Harbinger of Death would yield to the woman she loved.

Now, as he marched across the west gate plaza at the head of two columns of his littermates and closest kin, he felt like he was finally repaying the kindness they had been shown since their arrival in the Vale of Mists. His heart was already filled with pride after seizing the watch tower and delivering the treasured bell to Dame Sybyll, but facing off against the neatly ordered ranks of the Temple Guard and the Lothian soldiers behind them, his heart thundered in his chest with more than just pride.

"Break their ranks!" Ultrech shouted as he rushed the line of soldiers, using his heavy iron shield like a battering ram to knock aside their spears before slamming his half-moon-shaped ax into their flimsy wood-and-leather shields.

-CRUNCH-

"Aaaaaa!"

"Lord of Light, save..."

"Stand together, stand together!"

"Die demon!"

The sounds of anguished wails and chaotic, shouted orders filled the air as the 'twin tusks' of Ultrech's formation bit into the solid ranks of the Temple Guard. His men weren't just trying to pierce the enemy's formation; they were turning the space between their two columns into a killing ground, surrounding the warriors of the Church and giving them no space to dodge or evade as the columns of Iron Tusked soldiers knocked them down and trampled them underfoot.

"Spears to the front! Hold the line, you fatherless sons of whores," a Lothian captain behind the Temple Guard shouted, lashing at his men with both words and the crop he used to whip his horse. "The Church has them mired, strike now before they turn their axes on you!"

'Mired' was an apt descriptor of the situation that Ultrech found himself in. Their initial charge had shocked the temple guard with both its speed and the intensity of their collision, and the 'tusks' of his formation bit deep into the Templar ranks. Now that the battle was joined, however, his men found the Temple Guard to be a harder nut to crack than they'd initially seemed.

While the axes of the Iron Tusk infantry made quick work of the human's wood-and-leather shields, when they could get a good swing at them, the well trained soldiers of the Temple Guard quickly learned that their best hope of survival was to press as close to the boar demons as they could, standing shoulder to shoulder and thrusting with their swords while their wall of shields pressed directly up against the iron shields of their foes.

"Formation! Lower..."

Captain Ultrech's voice cut off abruptly as the scene around him shifted. The world tipped sideways, and his vision was suddenly filled with the legs and feet of his littermates as his body crashed into the cobblestones below.

From his chest, a brilliant, luminous shaft of light glittered before fading away to reveal a hole the size of a human's thumb, punched cleanly through the steel plate that should have protected his chest and splitting the mail and cloth beneath it. Blood began to flow from the wound, but Ultrech never noticed as his gaze was fixed on the stars high above him.

Countless stars moved and shifted, growing brighter and brighter as the twinkling motes of light transformed into a rain of radiant arrows, falling from the sky to pierce the bodies of Eldritch and human soldiers alike.

A Temple Guardsman fell limply across Ultrech's body, blood and thicker things flowing from a hole in his brightly polished helm as the rain of light swept across the chaotic melee. Not every wound was lethal, and Ultrech's ears were filled with pained grunts and squeals from his fellows as they raised their shields only to find their defenses useless against the arrows of light.

Perhaps the only blessing was that many arrows wasted themselves, falling on men who were already dead or embedding themselves harmlessly into the cobblestone plaza before fading away in a glittering mote of light.

"Fall Back!" Ultrech shouted with the last breath in his chest. "Fall back and save..." Save yourselves. Save your littermates. Save each other... save anyone you can. The final words he meant to say never passed his lips as the stars rained down from the sky and darkness filled his eyes.

## Chapter 949: Chaos

As an Inquisitor, Diarmuid had witnessed countless horrors over the course of his life. He had seen the depths of depravity men and even women could descend to when they were driven by both real and perceived injustice. More than once, he'd been summoned to investigate scenes of unspeakable cruelty attributed to 'demons' only to find a bitter, jealous, or greedy person hiding behind a carefully maintained mask of civility, even as their hands dripped with blood.

Recently, he'd also fought real demons. He came to understand their cunning, their ruthlessness, and the lengths to which they would go in their fight against his people and his faith. Diarmuid might have railed against his superiors in the Holy City when they declared that they would do nothing to Owain Lothian for the crime of magnicide so long as they were able to use him to slay demons in the upcoming Holy War, but after seeing the demons up close, he could at least understand why his superiors valued a man like Owain so highly.

He had seen cruelty, savagery, and a relentless drive to achieve victory at all costs, but never before had he seen anything like the abattoir that greeted his eyes when he finally managed to cut the impaled acolyte free of the icy forest that trapped him and pull his broken body out onto the town walls.

"Merciful Lord of Light, how..." one of the acolytes behind Diarmuid said as he stared at the carnage of shattered stone and torn bodies that littered the wall. Everywhere he looked, the snow was dyed red as if buckets of paint had been flung about with wild abandon. Worse than that, however, were the piles of dead and dying men who lay at the end of each trail of red.

Two-thirds of the Hanrahan soldiers had been ordered to the walls to form the first line of defense, which meant that there were more than two hundred soldiers who had either taken up bows and arrows or stood ready with spears to defend the archers atop the walls. Now, it seemed like at least half of those men were dead or soon would be, and dozens more clutched at wounds that ranged from minor cuts to shattered bones.

"Focus," Diarmuid said as he tried to drown out the sound of pained cries, whispered prayers, and behind it all, the echoing, endless drumming that came from the demons in the wilderness. "First, we save a life, so join your faith with mine," he said as he knelt next to the bleeding acolyte and began to pray.

"We offer our prayers and devotion to You, Lord of Light.

In this moment of suffering, we call upon Your infinite compassion.

Where hope seems dim and lost, we beg for Your Holy might.

Transform our small and shallow faith into Your healing power."

"My life is a candle flame in the night," the acolytes responded when Diarmuid finished his prayer.

"Together, our flames become one light."

No sooner had they spoken than a feeling of bone-deep fatigue washed over their bodies, bringing with it the aches and pains of an entire day's worth of hard labor and the ravenous hunger of a week of pious fasting as the Holy Lord of Light took their offering and used it to bathe the wounded acolyte in sacred golden flames.

In the light of those golden flames, the faint lines at the edges of Diarmuid's eyes and the corners of his lips looked deeper and the weight of the world seemed to weigh heavily on his shoulders, but all of that weight and strain fell away when he washed torn, frostburned flesh knitting itself back together and the faint flush of health returning to the flesh of the young acolyte's face.

"N-now what, your Worship?" one of the acolytes asked weakly as he slumped against the cold stones of the gatehouse. "There are too many injured people to heal like that," he said as one of his legs began to shake uncontrollably and his hands clenched involuntarily in the aftermath of making an offering to the Holy Lord of Light to pray for healing.

Suddenly, before Diarmuid could think of a response, the stars in the sky seemed to grow brighter as a shining light atop Hanrahan Keep twinkled in the darkness. A few heartbeats later, dozens of sacred, luminous arrows poured down from the sky as if the Heavens themselves had come to their aid.

"Loman," Diarmuid breathed in relief as he crawled to the inner edge of the wall, carefully keeping himself low to avoid detection by the demon giants outside the walls as he peered out on the west gate plaza.

"No... Merciful Light, no..." Diarmuid whispered as his eyes finally beheld what had transpired while he was trapped by the forest of ice in the gatehouse.

Sir Tommin's figure was unmistakable with the pristine white tabard and gleaming armor of one of the Church's most celebrated Templars. Only that armor was anything but pristine, as it looked crumpled and torn, nearly as broken as the man it was supposed to protect. But in place of the pious, quiet, and capable knight that Tommin had once been, only the sobbing, broken wreckage of a man remained as he clutched his head and wept.

Tommin's state was shocking enough, but as Diarmuid's eyes flicked about the battlefield, the scope of the tragedy only grew greater. Three of the four templars lay dead or dying, and the fourth was using all his might just to keep the Crimson Knight at bay for even a moment longer. Already, the Templar's tabard was stained red from his wounds, and blood flowed freely from the arm that was weighed down by the shattered remains of a shield.

Fully half of the Temple Guard lay dead or dying in the snow with only a scattering of demons around them suffering a similar fate, but it was the cause of many of their deaths that brought a strangled cry to the Inquisitor's lips.

Loman's rain of radiant arrows was merciless and relentless as they fell from the Heavens, and they claimed the lives of men and demons alike as they fell. At first glance, it seemed like there were more demons than men who were struck down by the holy arrows, but even as he watched, that changed dramatically.

"İtkuıla. Ükşa. İlğala-nnö!"

Diarmuid had never seen a demon like the white-furred, horned figure wielding a glowing sword of ice, but when it shouted and held its sword aloft, a soft, crystalline tinkling sound filled the air above them before a glittering dome began to form above the center of the plaza.

The dome wasn't a perfect hemisphere, Diarmuid realized in shock as he watched it shimmer into existence. Rather, it resembled one of the gilded rotundas that covered fountains in plazas throughout the Holy City, supported by a dozen icy pillars that stretched up from the cobblestones of the west gate plaza to support the crystalline dome.

In any other context, Diarmuid would have stopped to stare in admiration at something so beautiful. The crystalline rotunda transcended simple architecture, resembling a piece of art that caught the light of the stars above, the golden glow of the Temple in the distance, and even the shimmering blue-green ribbons of demonic light in the sky to create a dazzling display of rainbow hues that rippled across its multifaceted surface.

It should have been a thing of pure beauty that any servant of the light could admire, but it had been conjured by a demon, and its purpose was heresy of the highest order.

The luminous arrows pierced through the armor of friend and foe alike, dispassionately slaying anyone who the Holy Lord of Light deemed worthy of death, and even the shields of demons or temple guards were useless to block the radiant arrows, but the crystalline dome was different. When a glowing arrow struck the dome, it bent, twisted, and dissipated before it could pass all the way through the ice!

It was a sight that shook Diarmuid's faith to the core. The rain of arrows Loman had summoned with his Bow of Stars, if they were the same ones that Exemplar Domas was famous for calling down from the Heavens, were a declaration of the fate the Holy Lord of Light wrote in the stars for everyone on the battlefield. If a man's death tonight was written in the stars, then nothing could thwart the Holy Lord of Light's will.

And yet, this demon could, and dozens of demons were retreating back under the shelter of his glittering dome, which meant that the only people the rain of arrows was falling on... were the members of the Temple Guard and the Lothian soldiers with them.

But even the appearance of the glittering dome of ice that bent and twisted Loman's arrows into nothingness couldn't have prepared Diarmuid for the words he heard next when the diminutive figure of a horned demon wearing the wide-brimmed hat of a witch turned to stare directly at the place where he crouched behind the wall.

"Inquisitor!" Heila shouted over the din of battle. "Help me save your people! They will not listen to anyone else, but they may listen to you. Tell them. Lay down their weapons and we can save their lives!"

## Chapter 950: Heila's Gambit (Part One)

Diarmuid's mouth worked soundlessly as he tried to form words to reply to the witch who had called out to him.

It wasn't the first time he'd encountered a demon who could speak the king's common tongue, but it was the first time a demon had ever pleaded with him to help her save his people, and it took his mind several heartbeats to overcome his shock before he could think to reply.

"You withdraw!" Diarmuid shouted down at the diminutive witch. "Take your army back where you came from and leave us in peace! If you want to help save lives, then prove it by leaving!"

He didn't expect that the demons would withdraw. The Crimson Knight, the woman calling herself Ian Hanrahan's cousin, clearly had a personal grievance with the scheming Baron and Diarmuid didn't believe for a moment that she would let this army leave... but how could he command his soldiers to lay down their weapons?

"Listen to her, Inquisitor Diarmuid," a surprisingly familiar voice called as Hugo Hanrahan strode out from the protection of the gatehouse tunnel to address the inquisitor from the cobblestone plaza below.

"Lady Heila truly means you no harm, but if this continues," he said, gesturing to the rain of luminous arrows that ravaged the ranks of the human defenders even as they charged toward the demons taking shelter beneath the icy, glittering rotunda the white-furred demon had summoned.

"Lord Hugo?" Diarmuid said, blinking several times in surprise as he inspected the figure of the hawk-nosed bastard son of Ian Hanrahan. The man had gone missing along with a pair of Blackwell Guildmasters and Sir Rain more than a week ago when the first widespread demon raids broke out, but his presence here was beyond strange.

Hugo was wearing a fur-trimmed cloak over a well-made, almost courtly doublet of fine silk and silver embroidery, hardly the sort of attire a man wore onto the battlefield. At the same time, the long-bladed knife belted on at his hip, nearly half the length of an arming sword, was clearly of demonic origin despite the sheath studded with gemstones in the pattern of the Ascended Swordsman.

Strangest of all, however, he addressed the witch by name, and in very respectful tones at that.

"You can trust her, Inquisitor," Hugo pleaded. "She's the one who healed Sir Carwynn and his men. Please, tell them to lay down their weapons and take shelter with our soldiers. My people are dying and so are yours..."

It was that final line that pierced Diarmuid's reluctance like one of Loman's luminous arrows. While he was hesitating, people were dying, and it was the demons who were asking for a way to spare the lives of the common soldiers, not just for the first or second time, but for the third.

Dozens of faces flickered through the back of Diarmuid's mind as he thought of the powerful men and arrogant lordlings he'd found waiting at the end of one of his grim quests to uncover the truth. "They're just peasants, no one will even remember their names by next winter..." "She should have known better than to toy with my affections if she wasn't willing to share my bed..." "Just tell me how many sovereigns you need to forget what you've seen. Twenty? Thirty? Name your price and we can make this all go away..."

Time and time again, he'd been called to the scene of gruesome murders, and time after time, he had held the sobbing, trembling figures of grown men or young children as he promised them that he would find the demon responsible for the carnage, only to find a man of wealth and stature at the end of his quest for truth.

Now, as he watched Loman's rain of luminous arrows falling indiscriminately across the west gate plaza, he realized that he wasn't witnessing the judgment of the Holy Lord of Light bestowing a miracle on his people, but something else that was far more familiar.

Even a man as dedicated to his faith as Diarmuid couldn't deny truth when he heard it so plainly, and what was the Inquisition if not the search for truth in a world of darkness and deceit?

"Men of the Temple Guard! Lay down your weapons and take shelter!" Diarmuid shouted as he unleashed a burst of flames from his hand, hoping to catch the attention of the soldiers over the noise of the battlefield.

"Preserve your lives to fight another day," he added when he saw bitter reluctance on the faces of the soldiers. "But this battle is more than lost, and the Lord of Light would weep to see your lives spent for nothing!"

"I knew you were a good man, Diarmuid," Heila said as she stepped out from under the crystalline shelter, raising her wand high. "That's a second debt I owe you," she added cryptically before drawing the wand from her waist and making a wide, sweeping gesture.

Heila had seen healing performed on a massive scale once before, in the Arena of High Fen City. At the time, the sorcerers from the Cauldron of Flame had inflicted hundreds of spectators, many of them children, with burns that resembled severe sunburns in a demonstration of their power. Everyone in the arena that day had marveled as Lady Ashlynn called upon the forces of nature to heal their wounds and wash away the pain.

Now, Heila faced an even greater challenge, but she refused to shrink back from it as she cast her senses wide, feeling the fields of tall grasses trapped beneath the snow beyond the walls and the roots they sank deep into the earth.

Hauke's sorcery had made it harder to feel the life within the soil, but compared to the barren, frozen stone of the High Pass, even a long settled valley like the one surrounding the town of Hanrahan was teeming with life... She just had to stretch her senses far enough to find the pockets of strength she needed, and she hoped, to find the strength to save the lives of many soldiers, no matter which side of the battle they had fought on.