

The Vampire 891

Chapter 891: Last Resort (Part Two)

"Blasphemers!" Holm shouted as he reached into the pockets of his holy vestments to retrieve a bottle of Blessed Oil, anointed by the High Priest in Lothian City himself. It was one of his most treasured possessions, and one that he used sparingly for the most important of ceremonies. Until the demons arrived, he had been planning to use it to bestow a blessing on Carwyn's heir when the child was born, but now, he would use it to drive evil out of their village.

"All of you are heretics and blasphemers who consort with demons!" Holm cried as he pulled the stopper from the bottle, flinging his arm out and spraying Sir Carwyn, his wife, the demons, and everyone else who led the village with the sacred oil.

Holm knew that his faith was weak, but even a single spark should be enough to turn a few drops of blessed oil into a conflagration that would consume the demons and the corrupted leaders of the village. After all, the Blessed Oil contained a pure power that was far greater than his, and the bottle was still warm to the touch even in the depths of winter because of the blessing it contained. He just needed to pour all of his devotion into a single, heartfelt prayer...

"Holy Lord of Light and Flame,

I beseech you now in... guak! Hrrrrrrrk!"

Whatever words Holm had been preparing to say cut off in a strangled, wet gurgle as scaled coils thick as a man's torso wrapped around his body. The sharp crack of ribs snapping echoed through the hall, followed by Holm's desperate, wheezing gasps as air was crushed from his lungs.

The bottle that once held blessed oil shattered against the floor with a loud, crystalline crash, its spilling what little oil remained in a thin, glistening puddle that reflected the flickering flames of the nearby hearth as though it were a small pool of Holy Flames on the floor.

The instant Holm had thrown the oil, everyone he splashed began to move. Carwyn threw himself in front of Olwyna, shielding his pregnant wife with his body while Rhodri made a similar, if slightly slower move to protect his wife. Loftur was a heartbeat slower as he struggled to process what was happening, but seeing Carwyn and Rhodri moving to shield their loved ones, Loftur placed his considerable bulk

between the raving acolyte and the aging purser, Dyfad, who seemed like the only remaining person sitting in the chairs who was unable to defend himself.

Only Barsali moved to strike instead of moving to defend, and when he moved, it was with a blinding speed that shocked everyone present. The villagers at the front of the room screamed in fear, and several of them stumbled over each other in the crowded great hall to put even a few more paces between themselves and the suddenly violent demon.

"P-p-p-please don't kill me, I don't want to die," a middle-aged cheesemaker wailed as he stumbled and fell on his backside, scooting back across the floor to escape the looming demon.

"Holy Lord of Light, bless me and keep me in the warmth of your light..." another man began to mutter as he dropped to his knees, clasping his hands and reciting a prayer he'd said countless times since he was a young boy visiting the temple with his parents. Though, whether he prayed now to drive the demon away or to use his last words as a plea to the Holy Lord of Light to be kind to him in his next life, even he couldn't say.

Further back in the great hall, people were shoved up against the walls as the crowd rushed toward the doors that suddenly felt too narrow for anyone to escape through. Some people, especially the elderly among the villagers attending the gathering, had been knocked to the ground, and others were stopping to assist them, creating pockets where no one could move toward the doors, no matter how much they wanted to.

And then, there were a few people who responded to the threat of an attacking demon in an entirely different way. Men who snatched battered shields and treasured weapons off the walls, preparing to use weapons that had been carried by Sir Rhodri's father and grandfather in order to fight back against demons once again.

"De-mon," Holm choked out as he struggled against the constricting grip of the serpentine demon's powerful tail. He could feel his bones cracking, snapping, and piercing into his flesh and foamy, pinkish blood burbled from his lips as his eyes bulged and his whole face reddened under the intense, crushing pressure of the demon's attack.

That pressure became a thousand times worse when the demon's claws clamped down on the struggling acolyte's head, squeezing his skull like an over-ripe piece of fruit about to burst before giving it a sudden, wrenching twist.

-SNAP-

The sharp, wet crack of vertebrae separating was audible even over the crowd's screams. A sound like a thick branch snapping, followed by an awful, final silence as Holm's struggles ceased.

The sound of his own neck breaking was the last thing that Holm ever heard as he realized too late that he'd provoked a monster with the power to crush a tiny acolyte with feeble faith without so much as drawing a weapon.

And yet, he thought as his eyes fell on the unwavering figure of Sir Carwyn, this simple knight who was half his age had survived a duel with this very demon... He'd been crushed alive and nearly torn limb from limb, but he lived to tell the tale... he came home a hero... it wasn't right. It wasn't fair.

Holm had dedicated his entire life to making sure people followed the edicts of the Holy Lord of Light. He'd meted out punishments when people strayed from the path of the Light, and he always heaped praise and rewards on the most obedient, pious, and devout members of the village. His lifetime of service should have earned him the Holy Lord of Light's favor and protection against demons. He should have basked in the warmth of the light.

Instead, he felt only a growing darkness as his vision faded and a deep, chilling cold. This wasn't what he deserved at all. He deserved... deserved....

"Barsali!" Carwyn shouted in horror when he heard the sound of the acolyte's neck snapping. Already, his people were beginning to panic, on the verge of trampling over each other to escape the dangerous demon who had just killed the man Carwyn only intended to exile.

Now, everything was starting to unravel, and he was at a loss for what to do about it.

Chapter 892: Words Spoken At Last

"I'm sorry, Carwyn," Barsali said in slow, heavily accented words in the king's common tongue.

He'd been practicing with Loftur for several days, and there were several things he'd intended to say to Carwyn and his woman once he had the chance. He thought that Olwynna should hear from him just how impressive her husband was in battle and how his unwavering determination to fight had impressed the veteran gladiator.

More importantly, he wanted to tell her that the last words on Carwyn's lips when he thought he was going to die had been her name and that he clearly loved her enough to give his own life fighting to keep harm from reaching her. But now, when he finally spoke the king's common tongue, he had to piece together a very different set of phrases that he'd never thought he would need to say.

"You said. No killing. I'm sorry," the scaled warrior said as he slowly lowered Acolyte Holm's body to the floor while simultaneously lowering himself and bowing his head in a show of great remorse.

"No one. Hurt Carwyn." Barsali continued as the panicked villagers began to stare in shock at the demon, who sounded as if he had lost something incredibly precious the moment he killed Acolyte Holm. "No one. Hurt your woman," Barsali added. "No one. Hurt her babies," he added as the tip of his tail unconsciously pointed toward Olwynna.

"I'm sorry, Carwyn," Barsali said as he flexed his claws and placed them over his own heart. "I make amend," he said, bowing his head low as he prepared to offer up his heart for the wrong he'd done.

He knew that he had all but destroyed Carwyn's hope of building peace between their people in this village. He'd failed the man he wanted to befriend, he'd failed the Willow Whip who defeated him in the arena, he'd failed Lady Ashlynn and Lady Nyrielle...

But at least he'd defended Carwyn and his woman from the sorcery the acolyte was preparing to unleash. That alone was enough to give his death meaning, and if he was lucky, his death would buy Carwyn a chance to salvage peace between their peoples.

"Barsali, ká!" Carwyn shouted as he charged toward, grabbing the former gladiator's scaly forearm and pulling his clawed hand away from his chest before he could follow through on the promise of the Eldritch salute that Carwyn had always thought of as a simple formality until he realized that Barsali truly intended to offer up his own heart to atone for what he had done.

"Barsali, üxàŋ konsider-tikh," Carwyn said in carefully practiced Eldritch as he met the other man's golden eyes with their strange, vertical pupils. "You are my friend," he repeated in the king's common tongue, saying the words he'd been holding back until they were no longer confined by the roles of prisoner and his guard.

It had seemed rational, logical even, to keep a bit of distance between them until they could exist as true peers, but when he heard Barsali say that he had made his move to protect Carwyn, Olwynya and her child... it seemed silly to have held himself back after the other man had done so much to prove his intentions.

"Barsali, üxàŋ konsider-tikh," the young knight repeated, glancing over his shoulder to receive a confirming nod from Loftur that he had spoken the words correctly before he turned back to his serpentine companion. "And you protected Olwynya and our baby. You don't need to make amends for that. Not now or ever," he said as his gaze fell to the body of the slain Acolyte on the floor.

The stench of death had begun to fill the air, mixing with the cloying sweetness of the perfumed, Blessed Oil and the thick smell of sweat and unwashed bodies as terrified people huddled together against the walls, too frightened to move now that the demon had killed one of their own.

"I'm sorry, my friend," Carwyn said softly to the confused-looking warrior whose forearm he still held. "But I need to borrow this moment to make peace. Forgive me for using you," he said, feeling at the moment as though he understood Lady Ashlynn better than he had before.

There had been something uncomfortably cold and calculating about the way she used Sir Rain's act of defiance and her swift punishment to make a point with Carwyn and Liam Dunn. It felt both opportunistic and inevitable, and part of him had wondered if she'd planned to goad Sir Rain into giving her an excuse to punish him from the very beginning.

Now, however, he felt like he understood at least a little of what she must have been thinking when she was forced to make the best of circumstances that she likely never wished to confront. Carwyn only hoped that he could do half as well as Lady Ashlynn had when he followed her example.

As he spoke, Loftur approached carefully, relaying Carwyn's words to the serpentine warrior whose command of the human tongue only amounted to a few words and phrases. Meanwhile, Carwyn turned to his frightened people and raised up Barsali's clawed hand in his own.

"You see?" Carwyn shouted to be heard over the increasingly loud murmurs and frightened sobs of the villagers. "This is how they come among us! As friends, ready to kill in order to protect my wife and her baby from a man who would burn innocent people alive for the crime of 'heresy.'"

"This is the true face of the 'enemy' we've feared our entire lives," Carwyn said as he looked back at the smiling face of his strange, serpentine friend. "If you give me the choice between a friend like this, or a faith like his," he said as he pointed at Holm's body. "Then I know which I choose, and I will never regret it."

"I still have more to tell," he said as he signaled for the guards to carry away Acolyte Holm's remains. "But just as I made my choice, you need to choose to hear my words. Everyone, please leave the hall. Spend a few minutes in the night air and then decide if you want to hear what I have to say or not."

"I know my words don't mean as much as they once did," Sir Rhodri said as he walked up next to Carwyn. "But I'm proud of the choice my son has made," he said as he placed a hand firmly on Carwyn's shoulder. "I still need to hear what he has to say, and I intend to sit with him when he tells his tale. I hope you all will do the same."

"Thank you, Father," Carwyn said softly as the villagers began to file out of the great hall. "Now, I just hope enough of them come back..."

Chapter 893: Two Dangers & One Source of Hope (Part One)

It took time to clear the hall of so many people, and more time to clean up from the aftermath of Acolyte Holm's attack. Despite the bitter cold outside, Carwyn ordered the shutters to be opened, at least for a few minutes to allow fresh air to cleanse the hall of the smell of death and fear as he tried to figure out how he would speak to his people now that the village had lost its religious leader.

"Barsali?" Olwyna said, pulling Carwyn out of his thoughts as his heavily pregnant wife approached the serpentine warrior with tentative, slow steps as she held her hand out to the warrior who had just demonstrated how quickly he could move between quiet stillness and deadly violence.

"Thank you," she said hesitantly when she drew close enough to reach out and grab one of his large, scaly hands with both of her much smaller hands. "I, I don't know the words," she said as she glanced nervously at Loftur for help.

Carwyn had introduced both men to her at the beginning of the evening's gathering, and he'd told her beforehand that they were allies she could trust, but she would have been lying if she said that she had been comfortable sitting so close to 'demons' with claws sharp enough to tear her child from her womb.

But now she understood why her husband trusted these strange, beastly men so much. Their appearances might be terrifying, and she'd had nightmares about what Barsali had done to her husband for weeks, but now, when her life was in danger, he'd attacked in order to protect her and her child...

No matter what reservations she had about her husband befriending the creature who had nearly killed him in battle just weeks ago, it was hard to hold on to those feelings now.

"Please tell him that I'm grateful," Olwyna told Loftur. "And that I forgive him for taking Carwyn away from me and making me worry so much," she said as she let go of the serpentine man's hand, only to point a finger at him as her tone became much sterner.

"But also tell him that I don't forgive him for hurting my husband so badly that he needed a witch to heal him," she said pointedly. "So, if he wants me to forgive him for that, then he needs to stay here and protect us when the Church comes to punish us for what he did to Acolyte Holm. And... and if the Church kills us for being heretics," she said hesitantly as she grappled with the consequences of what just happened. "Then, then he has to promise to take my baby to safety!"

Loftur chuckled warmly with a genuine, belly-shaking laugh as he looked at the short, human woman pointing her finger at Barsali's towering figure like the mother of a den, scolding a cub, even though Barsali was both older than her and much, much more powerful. But the scaled warrior just ducked his head and nodded as Loftur relayed her words.

"He says that he will never let the Church harm you or your babies," the bearish soldier told her once Barsali gave his answer. "And that he'll pledge the rest of his life to the Willow Whip if he has to in order to bring her here to defend the village against the sorcerers of the Church. He says he knows that he's weak, but he believes in the power of the Willow Whip, who defeated the sorcerers of the Cauldron of Flame."

"He doesn't have to pledge his life to anyone to see this village defended," Carwyn said as he wrapped an arm lovingly around Olwyna while he met Barsali's sincere gaze. "Lady Ashlynn wants us to prove that humans can live side by side with Eldritch neighbors in peace. She doesn't want to see our village turned into a battlefield, and she asked us to stay out of the coming war and keep to ourselves."

"If the Church comes for us, we'll defend ourselves," Carwyn said. "But I'm sure we won't be left to fight off Inquisitors and Templars by ourselves if they come," he said as he gave a reassuring squeeze. "And Loftur," he added as he forcefully changed the topic to something lighter than the impending response of the Church.

"Tell him that I appreciate his offer to protect my family, but we only have one baby on the way," he said as he placed a hand gently over Olwyn's belly. "I know the Clan of the Great Claw may have many cubs at once, and Barsali said the Scaled Clan lay a clutch of eggs, but humans only have one child at a time. It will be a little while before we have another."

For a moment, Loftur and Barsali spoke back and forth rapidly as the bearish soldier explained what Carwyn had said. The conversation, however, went on quite a bit longer as Barsali asked several questions as if he didn't believe what Loftur was telling him. The conversation even grew heated until, eventually, the bearish interpreter threw up his hands in a gesture of helplessness and turned to Carwyn and Olwyn to ask an uncomfortable question.

"He says that his people are very sensitive to tremors and heartbeats," Loftur said awkwardly. "And he says that he is certain that he hears two hearts beating in Madame Olwyn's womb. He says that he isn't surprised that Sir Carwyn has such a strong seed to father two children when most men can only father one at a time, because Carwyn is a true Champion."

"And," Loftur said, appearing incredibly reluctant as he looked between the shocked faces of the humans in the room. "And he says that if you doubt his ears, he can feel even better with his tail. If you let him touch your belly with his tail, he can tell you for certain if there are two heartbeats or one."

"No, absolutely not," Sir Rhodri said as he strode forward to stand between Barsali and his daughter-in-law. He didn't know the scaled warrior well, but his impression had been favorable so far, but he had just seen that tail crush a man to death, and he knew how quickly the Eldritch warrior could turn from stillness to violence. He wanted to trust, but the idea of letting that tail touch his daughter-in-law where she carried his soon-to-be-born grandchild was more than even he could accept.

"You cannot touch her," Rhodri insisted. "Carwyn, help me make him understand."

"No, Father," Carwyn said in a hushed, almost frightened tone as he looked into his wife's wide, horrified eyes. "We have to know for sure. If Barsali can tell with just a touch, then... then we need to know, don't we, my love?" Carwyn said as he tightly held her hand.

"Mmm," Olwynna said, biting her lower lip and nodding her head slowly as she leaned up against her husband for support. Her legs felt like jelly, and all the strength seemed to have drained away from her body from the moment that Loftur had said 'two heartbeats.' Now, it was all she could do to support herself and pull aside the cloak wrapped around her shoulders to make it easier for Barsali to touch her swollen belly.

Loftur and Barsali exchanged puzzled looks and more than a few words as the bearish man explained what had been said, but both men were puzzled as they looked around the room to see the faces of every remaining human looking pale and bloodless, while Carwyn's mother appeared on the verge of tears.

"What's wrong?" Loftur asked. "More children are more joyous, aren't they?"

"Loftur," Carwyn said hesitantly around a lump in his throat that seemed to be connected to a great, sinking weight in his stomach. "It isn't like that for humans. Two children at once means three deaths unless a High Priest from the Church prays over the mother and her children through the entire birth. But now, for us..." he said, unable to speak the words as he looked at the spot on the floor where a servant had just swept up the shattered remains of Acolyte Holm's bottle of Blessed Oil.

His message was clear enough, even without speaking the words. With the support of the Church, out here in the frontier, there was a chance that a knight could receive the aid of the High Priest in Lothian City to help his wife and children survive childbirth. But now they had turned themselves into heretics who the Church would see burned at the stake before they ever helped with healing prayers.

If Owyna truly carried two children within her belly, then the moment that Barsali killed Acolyte Holm to defend her, he had also sentenced her to die.

Chapter 894: Two Dangers & One Source of Hope (Part Two)

When Barsali heard Loftur's explanation, his face grew solemn as he slowly extended the tip of his tail, placing it on Olwynna's rounded belly with the greatest of tenderness. Everyone still present in the great hall held their breaths, leaving the hall silent but for the sounds of flames crackling in the hearth lest

they disturb the moment that the serpentine warrior focused all of his attention on the feelings of vibrations under his scales.

"Two," he said solemnly in the king's common tongue as he pulled back his tail. "Two babies," he said with deep, grave certainty.

At the back of the hall, Carwyn's mother collapsed into her chair, breaking out in loud, trembling sobs as she realized that the hope she'd had of seeing her son return safely home to welcome his firstborn into the world had been brutally crushed by the same tail that had taken the life of Acolyte Holm.

Olwyna's sobs were almost as loud as she buried her face in her husband's chest, clutching at his tunic to hold herself up as dark despair warred with bitter fury at the Holy Lord of Light who seemed to have planned a punishment for her from the very beginning, giving her a moment of joyous reunion before condemning her to die when her family refused to side with his murderous acolyte.

"Shhh, hush now," Carwyn said gently, stroking her hair and trying to soothe her as best he could while his mind caught up with the implications of Barsali's revelation. At first, he'd been completely blindsided by the thought that his wife carried twins, and he'd thought only about what he had known to be true for his entire life.

Two children at once were a death sentence to both the mother and the children, and it had been true for every commoner in Lothian March and almost every commoner in the Kingdom of Gaal for as long as anyone could remember. Only members of the aristocracy were able to plead for the Church to save their children because anyone born into a noble family had met their struggle well enough in their previous life to be rewarded in the next one...

Those children were deserving of the Church's efforts to save, even if the attempt still failed often enough that most noblemen kept their wives within the walls of a temple from the moment they could hear two heartbeats within the womb.

But that had been the old truth. The way things were before. Now, Carwyn knew better than most that the Church wasn't their only hope of receiving healing that could save the lives of both his wife and their children. If Lady Heila could mend his torn and broken limbs, then surely she could save Olwyna as well.

"There's still hope, my love," he said gently, speaking loud enough that everyone else in the hall could hear. "Lady Heila mended my broken body, I'm sure she can heal you as well. And if she can't," he added in a tone that was increasingly confident. "Then I'm certain that Lady Ashlynn can."

"Loftur is right," Carwyn said as he placed a finger gently under Olwyna's chin and lifted her face to meet his gaze. "Two children are twice as joyous," he said as he held her tightly. "And I cannot wait to see you holding our babies in your arms."

"R-really?" Olwyna said as she choked back sobs and wiped a wet mess of tears and snot from her face, as she looked up at her husband with moist, shining eyes that didn't dare to hope. "Can she really... can a witch really heal like that?"

"I'm sure she can," Carwyn said, looking to the pair of warriors from the Vale of Mists for confirmation and hoping that he hadn't spoken too soon.

"I haven't seen the witches healing people," Loftur said after speaking briefly with Barsali. "But Barsali has. He said that, in the arena, sorcerers demonstrating the might of their flames once burned hundreds of people in the audience all at once. But Her Dominion, the Mother of Trees, was able to heal hundreds of people at once in only a few heartbeats."

"He also says that the Mother of Trees suffered horrible wounds fighting in the High Pass, and that people who saw her fall at the end of the battle feared she would die from her wounds," the bearish man continued. "But as soon as she returned to the forest of the Vale, she was as strong or stronger than before."

"Lady Nyrielle is the Harbinger of Death," Loftur added, speaking for himself instead of relaying Barsali's words. "And Lady Ashlynn is the Mother of Trees, a source of life and a mother to everyone in the Vale of Mists. If you bring your wife to her, then as a mother to us all, she will not let your wife or children die. I'm sure of it," he said solemnly.

"You see, my love?" Carwyn said as he gently brushed the hair from his wife's face. "Twice the joy. But now, you need to think of twice as many names," he added with a faint smile as he gently tapped her nose with a finger.

At the same time, he realized that he finally understood how he would explain things to the villagers. Everything had suddenly changed, and they had likely lost the support of the Church for many years to come. But in the process, they had gained something greater.

The Church would care for his wife and child because they were members of the aristocracy, lucky enough to be born into a family of knights. But Lady Ashlynn and her coven would care for them because she dreamed of building a better world where everyone could thrive... human and Eldritch, noblemen and common folk... and the world she wanted to build was a far brighter one than the world where the Church made everyone bow down before their light.

Now, all he needed to do was help his villagers to realize the same truths that he had... and he knew just how to do it.

Chapter 895 895: The Eve of Battle (Part One)

Cold winter winds shook the towering, evergreen trees in the forest, sending large clumps of snow crashing to the ground below and adding an unsteady rhythm of -FWUMP- sounds to the more common noises of an army camped in the depths of winter.

The forces under Dame Sybyll's command had assembled in the wilderness outside Hanrahan town more than a day ago, and they immediately began making preparations for their assault on the town.

The Golden Eyed soldiers who had once been part of the Black Wolf Brigade formed the core of the Second Army, and as soon as the servants in camp began pitching tents, the wolf-like soldiers had spread through the forest, stripping it of any game larger than a feral hog in order to stretch the supplies of the army of over three hundred people.

At the same time, the smallest soldiers of the army, men from across the mountains who stood even shorter than the Horned Clan with large, round ears and soft gray fur, raced out into the lands surrounding Hanrahan Town, creating a web of eyes and ears that provided a steady flow of information back to the leaders of the army.

Heila was no different than many in the army, even though she wasn't a soldier in the strictest sense of the word. The tent she occupied was large enough for five men who were twice her size, and yet she was the only person making use of it.

"Through Willow's sap and nature's gift,

Let healing power tend wounds swift.

In balm and salve, let wellness dwell,

To mend what battle's fury fells."

Silvery green energy flowed from Heila's outstretched palms, forming dozens of thin tendrils of energy that danced and swayed like the branches of a willow tree in the wind as they stirred the salve in her cauldron, infusing it with the power of the world to mend wounds that were certain to be far too common in the days to come.

As remedies went, the healing salve Heila selected was one of the weakest she knew how to create, but it had the advantage of requiring very few rare ingredients and she was able to concoct it in large batches that filled her small bronze cauldron to the brim.

The scent of chamomile and willow-bark filled the tent as she began carefully ladling the thin, yellowish salve into a series of earthenware jars, topping each one with a cork stopper and dipping the top of the jar in a simmering pot of beeswax before placing it neatly into a box along with several identical jars of the power-infused ointment.

"I hope it's enough to help," she said as she mopped the sweat from her brow after bottling the last of the salve. More than anything, the salve would ward off infection and slightly speed the body's own healing, allowing a wound that would have healed in weeks to heal in days.

For anyone expecting a miracle cure from the Willow Whip, it would fall far short, but on the scale of an entire army, it would allow dozens of wounded soldiers to return to battle much faster than they would have normally, which would be vital if Ashlynn was going to maintain the ambitious tempo of assaults she'd planned for her Winter War.

"I'll be out in a few minutes," Heila called to the figure who had been waiting outside the tent since halfway through her concoction. It was impossible for someone as large as her visitor to move silently through the snow-covered forest, and his passage had knocked even more snow from the trees, but

there was no one in the camp who would dare to disturb a witch in the middle of practicing her craft, and her guest was no exception.

"The snow is even deeper than this morning, Lady Heila," a deep, rumbling voice said from outside the tent. "Skirts might be... unwise," he said, carefully not pointing out how much the diminutive witch had struggled to move through the deeper drifts of snow in the final hours of the army's march.

"I learned my lesson, Ipiktok," Heila said as a faint blush spread across her cheeks. She was already unlacing the bodice of her dress, stripping away the comfortable outfit that smelled of fresh herbs and sweat after her long session of concocting in favor of something more practical for the night to come.

If it had been up to her, she would have preferred that this night never come. Dame Sybyll was powerful enough to rule as an Eldritch Lady in her own right if she wished to, or even a High Lady given enough time to build the forces under her banner. As powerful champions went, there were few under Lady Nyrielle's command who could match up to her.

If the humans were smart, they would choose their champion and send him out to face the Crimson Knight in a single duel for the fate of their city. Whether it was the Templar Tommin or the Inquisitor Diarmuid who were said to be heading to Hanrahan Town, either man would have been a worthy foe for Dame Sybyll, though Heila doubted that anything other than Sir Tommin's Holy Light Blade could truly threaten her.

Instead, they would clash in the human way, throwing armies against each other until there had been so much bloodshed and death that one side had to yield to the other or face utter extermination. Worse, because they were assaulting the humans in their own homes, common people might be foolish enough to wade into battle with improvised weapons as if they had a chance of turning the tide.

There was nothing to look forward to in a battle that had so much potential to turn into a bloodbath, and as Heila began to make her own preparations for the night to come, she silently prayed that their preparations would at least be effective at keeping the innocents from joining the fray, because if they failed, then thousands of humans would die and Ashlynn's hopes of forming a lasting peace afterward would become much, much harder to fulfill.

Chapter 896 896: The Eve of Battle (Part Two)

For a moment, the Willow Witch paused, hesitating as she stared at the outfit that was neatly folded atop one of the chests in her tent. When she fought in the arena, she had worn a padded gambeson in

the midnight blue of the Vale of Mists, along with a coat of mail borrowed from one of the soldiers in Lady Nyrielle's personal guard. At the time, she'd been proud to don the colors of the Vale and to stand on the sands in attire that reminded everyone where the Willow Whip came from.

Now, however, like Lady Ashlynn, the time had come for her to wear armor that was suited to her role in battle and that required several changes from the simple armor of common soldiers.

The quilted breeches she slid into had drawstrings at the hems that cinched them tight just above her cloven hooves, giving her the mobility she needed to dash about the battlefield. Whether it was to attack the enemy or rush to the side of fallen soldiers, mobility was one of the most important facets of the way she intended to fight, and Heila carefully buckled a brightly polished set of steel greaves over the dull green fabric that added an extra layer of protection for the most vulnerable part of her legs.

The quilted doublet she wore over her simple tunic was another seemingly simple change in her armor, replacing the dual-layered chain and mail with a single garment that added dozens of small steel plates to her innermost layer of protection. Patterned after the armor worn by the Black Wolf Brigade, it sacrificed some protection in order to reduce the weight she would need to carry when she moved around a much larger battlefield than the confined area of the High Fen Arena.

The final layer of her armor, however, was something truly unique, unlike anything worn by soldiers of the Vale in any of its four armies.

The greatest predator in the Briar was the Giant Thornback Alligator, and Heila and Ashlynn had hunted one of the massive beasts as part of their 'graduation' from the Mother of Thorns' tutelage over the summer. The first thing that Heila had made with the leather of the powerful beast was her War Hat, which protected her better than any helm ever would and provided several additional advantages as well.

Now, she slid her arms into the sleeves of the second item that had been crafted from the skin of the giant, thorny lizard. The leather coat was long enough that its hem brushed up against her ankles when she walked and heavy enough that it would remain still in all but the stiffest winds, but rather than feeling oppressive, the weight felt comforting when it settled on her shoulders, as if a protective arm had wrapped around her and given her a hug.

"Thank you, Jacques," she whispered as she ran her fingers over the tooled leather that the Sandbox Witch had infused his thorny, protective energy into before sending it with her when she and Ashlynn left the Briar. There had been no time then to fashion it into appropriate armor, but given the

opportunity, the Sorcerers of Sundered Earth had been more than willing to craft something suitable for the famed Willow Whip out of the leather Jacques had prepared for her.

Once she was dressed, Heila's hands moved quickly, filling the pockets of the leather coat with a number of small bottles, packets of powders and other things that would be useful in the battle to come before she grabbed the leather, wide brimmed War Hat that completed her outfit and settled it atop her head along with a braided, coiled whip that rested on her hip.

When she finally stepped out of the tent, Ipiktok recoiled visibly as he felt the powerful, prickly aura that accompanied the Willow Whip. For the past several weeks, he'd mostly encountered her in her role as Ashlynn's lady-in-waiting and as a healer tending to the injured. Unconsciously, her mild, feminine appearance had worn away his first impression of the fierce warrior who defeated him and nine of his best men on the sands of the arena.

Now that he looked at the fierce, armored witch before him, however, he realized that the core of strength within her had never softened. If anything, it had grown fiercer and stronger than it had been when he fought her, combined with a resolve to never again find herself as powerless as she'd been on the slopes of the High Pass when Lady Ashlynn needed her the most and she was able to do so little to help.

"Lady Heila," Ipiktok said as he knelt before the Willow Whip and lowered his head. "The scouts spotted a caravan of human soldiers entering the city. They await you in the command tent," he said as he extended a hand that was large enough for the diminutive witch to sit on. "I came to carry you there," he said a touch awkwardly as his fingers coiled back from the prickly aura emanating from the armored witch.

"I appreciate the offer, Ipiktok," Heila said with a faint smile. "But this was a gift from the Sandbox Witch," she said as she gently caressed the leather that would shred the hands of anyone who tried to grab her but would never harm the person it was intended to protect. "You won't be able to touch it easily, so I'll walk behind you if you can clear a path," she offered.

"In that case, follow me," the giant Tuscan said with an audible sigh of relief as he stood and stepped away from the thorny aura that protected the diminutive witch.

After watching the Cypress Witch and the Oak Witch in their assault of the Summer Villa, Ipiktok had begun to wonder if Lady Ashlynn had made a mistake in holding back her strongest combatants from the

assault on the much larger and more heavily fortified Hanrahan Town, especially when he heard that there would be Templar and sorcerers from the human Church participating in this battle.

Now that Lady Heila had put down the soft mantle of the healer, however, and emerged again as a woman ready for war, he realized how wrong he'd been. There was still a wide gap between the newest members of Lady Ashlynn's coven and her first witch, and if anything, Ipiktok felt sorry for the humans who would have to face her.

Chapter 897: Plans in the Final Hours of Daylight (Part One)

Heila felt the weight of a dozen pairs of eyes as soon as she stepped into the command tent, and for a moment, she had to resist the urge to turn around and leave, or to blurt out that Lady Ashlynn or someone who was actually important and capable would be here soon.

She had followed Lady Ashlynn for months and in that time, she had transformed so completely that her current self was almost completely unrecognizable to the simple serving girl she'd been less than a year ago. Yet in all that time, she had yet to truly understand what it meant for Ashlynn to be Nyrielle's Seneschal until now.

As a witch and even as a warrior, Heila had plenty of confidence, but she never thought of herself as a leader. Lady Ashlynn was a leader. Lady Nyrielle was too. But Heila was someone who followed those women, acting on their orders, she wasn't a person who commanded others. Yet now, because the army currently answered to a vampire, she found herself in the uncomfortable position of holding command during the daylight hours when Dame Sybyll slept.

"I'm sorry to keep everyone waiting," Heila said awkwardly as she looked around her tent and realized that all of the army's other leaders had already arrived, and from the look of things, they had been present for some time.

At the center of the command tent, a table held a detailed map of Hanrahan Town and the surrounding areas. The map had grown increasingly detailed as the scouts and hunters brought in more and more information, and by now, there wasn't a single wood cutter's cottage, farmhouse or sentry station that hadn't been marked on the map on the table.

"We don't mind it, nobody minds it, High One," a petite woman even shorter than Heila said from the stool she stood in order to make updates to the map. Captain Lusia was a member of the Lightfoot Clan,

one of the physically smallest clans in the Eldritch world, with soft brown fur, delicate features and large, saucer-like ears.

"Come here and look, look," she said excitedly as she tapped an empty stool sitting next to her. The wide grin on her face made it clear to everyone who knew her that she was savoring the fact that the 'High One' was a woman almost as small as herself.

The Second Army had been formed around the core of Savis's Black Wolf Brigade and the captains from High Lord Hamdi's territory were all physically powerful, imposing men. Elsewhere in the tent, a brooding pair of captains from the Iron Tusk clan stood shoulder to shoulder with the Golden Eyed warriors, looking as if they were vying for the title of supreme hunters of the forest. Meanwhile a trio of lanky archers from the Glass Eyed Clan looked on with an air of quiet superiority, as if they floated above the contentions within the army for the title of strongest elite soldiers.

Adding Ipiktok's giant Tuscans only made it worse for the tiny Lightfoot woman whose people were the furthest thing from predators you could find in the fierce army that Ashlynn and Nyrielle had put together out of the most elite soldiers who had joined their cause. And yet, the small stature, incredible speed and mastery of concealment had made the scouts under Captain Lusia's command the clear stars of the early phases of their campaign against Hanrahan Town.

When Heila took her place next to the map, she did her best to look confident, mimicking the way she'd seen Lady Ashlynn and Lady Nyrielle conduct themselves on countless occasions. She carefully studied all of the changes to the map, noting all of the new slips of parchment with neat writing that had been added to the map since she last saw it in the early hours of the morning, and saying nothing until she was confident that she understood everything she had seen.

Inwardly, her heart raced as she tried to remember all of the notations the army used to mark down and categorize enemy soldiers, whether they appeared strong and well trained or weak and ill-equipped, whether they were heavily or lightly armored and dozens of other details the scouts found important.

Each slip of parchment might be small, but the symbols on them carried a great deal of meaning to the professional warriors gathered around her, adding to the intimidating weight that made her feel she was the wrong person to stand in for Dame Sybyll while the powerful vampire slept away the day.

Outwardly, however, everyone in the tent backed away from her as the aura of prickly power emanating from the Willow Witch intensified, making the diminutive woman look even fiercer and more intimidating in their eyes than she had been when she first joined the army.

Most of them had seen her fight in the arena, and they'd all heard Ipiktok's story about the painful curse she'd inflicted on him and his men in order to force them to surrender, but seeing her from the stands or hearing stories about her did little to prepare them for the fierce presence she radiated when she entered the tent in her War Hat and armored long-coat.

They had already been grateful to be joined by such a powerful healer before a great battle, and when they heard that she was delayed in joining them because she was concocting healing salves for the wounded the battle was certain to produce, none of them had uttered a word of complaint that they had to wait for her to finish. But now that they saw her dressed for war, the smiles on their faces grew almost predatory as they imagined what it would be like to fight beside her in the coming battle.

"Captain Ipiktok mentioned you saw human soldiers entering the city," Heila said, giving up on trying to interpret the markings on the parchment and doing as she had seen Ashlynn do so many times before, asking without phrasing her question as a question. It was something subtle, but in her mind at least, it was one of Ashlynn's best ways of maintaining her authority, even when she knew little about the specifics being discussed.

"Tell me about them," Heila commanded, keeping her words brief as she fought to cling to the illusion that she was worthy of holding command in Dame Sybyll's absence. It was a feeble illusion, in her mind, but hopefully, if she held on to the lessons she learned from Lady Ashlynn, it would be enough to get through the night.

Chapter 898: Plans in the Final Hours of Daylight (Part Two)

"Yes, High One," Lusia said, too excited to be in the presence of her idol to be bothered by the prickly aura emanating from her armor. "The first group came early, an hour ahead of the second one. They were a smaller, shabbier group with light armor and only a few men on horses. Less than thirty men in all."

"Banners are important to humans," Heila said as she frowned at the slips of parchment on the map, wishing they contained more information about the heraldry humans used to divide themselves up. "Did you see any banners with this group? Any symbols on their shields?" Heila asked as she glanced at the dark-haired figure in the corner of the tent who looked like he wished he was as small as Captain Lusia.

Hugo Hanrahan occupied an awkward position in the army. He had offered his services to Lady Ashlynn but she had yet to take him on. Moreover, everyone knew that his life belonged to Dame Sybyll who had yet to decide whether or not she would execute him for his family's crimes against hers.

At the same time, he had clearly made the decision to prove his worth, and he'd offered up invaluable information about the city and its defenses as they planned their assault, which was why he had been summoned to the command tent along with the other leaders while Liam Dunn was still under guard as a captive and 'observer' of the battle to come.

Now, Heila wasn't just asking for information that would help her understand the map. She was also asking for information that they would need Hugo Hanrahan to interpret.

"Um, here it is, I have it, I know," Lusia said quickly as she fished in the discrete pockets sewn into her tunic, pulling out several additional slips of parchment containing the individual reports from each of her scouts. "The banner was green with a stag's head and an arrow, or a spear or something like that. A lance?"

"It's my brother," Hugo said with a heavy sigh. "Half-brother. It's Bastian and his guard," he explained, quickly putting layers of distance between himself and Ian Hanrahan's 'legitimate' heir. "He probably rode ahead of Loman's forces in order to tell my father to prepare a reception. If Liam is right and Marquis Bors is favoring Loman as his heir, my father wouldn't want to miss a chance to curry favor with the next lord of the march and Bastian knows it."

"So that makes this group Loman's?" Heila asked, pointing to another slip of paper and looking between Hugo and Captain Lusia.

"This group had three banners," she said as she examined the sketches provided by the scout who had seen them. "A circle surrounded by wavy lines in red and gold, a sword with white lines radiating out from it, and... and one that looks like this," she said, hopping off her stool to hand a sketch over to the hawk-nosed human who seemed strangely intent on betraying his kind.

"It's a sun rising over a castle's walls," Hugo explained as he examined the sketch. "It's meant to be the castle gatehouse. It's lord Loman's personal sigil," he added with a complicated look on his face. If Loman was traveling under his own sigil instead of the radiant sun and stars of the Church while the rest of the soldiers flew that banners of the Inquisition and the Templars, then he really had broken with the Church in order to become the next lord of Lothian March.

It shouldn't matter to the man who had briefly been Owain Lothian's Steward, but somehow, it still hurt to see confirmation that his former liege lord had fallen from grace. All of the plotting, the scheming, the trip to Blackwell County and everything that had happened afterwards... and for what?

For a moment, Hugo felt closer to Owain than he had ever been before. Bors Lothian was treating his eldest son like a placeholder, a seat warmer who could occupy the position of heir until he was ready to place his favored child on the throne. It wasn't much different than the way Ian Hanrahan had treated Hugo, lifting him up and acknowledging him publicly when he needed to produce a 'spare heir' and then washing his hands of the unfavored child once his usefulness had come to an end.

"If Loman has arrived with the Templar and the Inquisitor," Heila said as she searched the map for another marker. "Then we'll be attacking the city tonight. We need to move our soldiers as close to Hanrahan Town as we can before the sun sets so we don't waste any of Dame Sybyll's time tonight."

The winter knight would be long, especially for the humans who found themselves fighting a pitched battle to defend their homes, but whether it was long enough to breach the town's outer defenses and seize Ian Hanrahan's fortified keep at the heart of the town remained to be seen. If they wasted too much time marching their army into position, it might mean they lost their most powerful fighter right when they needed her the most.

"There's a sentry post in the way of a direct march," one of the Golden Eyed captains, a man with dull brown fur and several small rings of victory in his left ear said as he forced himself to ignore the Willow Witch's prickly aura and approached the map, pointing to a collection of markings and a small slip of parchment. "We'll lose an hour of daylight if we have to sneak around it."

"Isn't it just a dozen men in a pile of rocks?" One of the Iron Tusked captains asked, wrinkling his stubby snout at the notion that it would be any kind of obstacle to their advance. "Let me take the boys out for a stroll, we'll knock it right down so the rest of you don't need to waste time going around."

"Hugo, do you know this sentry tower?" Heila asked, looking at the source of much of their information about the Hanrahans. "Yesterday, you said that some of the towers light signal fires if they see enemies and some ring bells. Which kind is this?"

The presence of those warning towers had forced Dame Sybyll to place her camp farther away from Hanrahan town than she wanted, but she hadn't been willing to risk detection by toppling a tower or killing its watchers.

According to the Crimson Knight, without knowing the schedule that guards used to rotate in and out of manning the towers, the risk was too great that whoever they killed in the night would have their relief show up in the morning and raise the alarm before the army was ready to fight.

"That's an old tower," Hugo said as he looked at the map. "Dame Sybyll's father ordered it to be built, along with each of these," he said, tapping several other marked sentry stations on the map. "It's a solid tower with a good bell," he said, delivering the news that no one wanted to hear.

Bells were expensive and bells that were big enough and loud enough to be heard from leagues across the valley were even more expensive. But it was also much, much faster to ring a warning bell than to light a signal fire, which was why Baron Brighton Hanrahan had spent so much money when he constructed them. In his mind, every second of warning was priceless.

Baron Ian Hanrahan, by contrast, hoarded every gold sovereign as though they were more precious than the lives of his farmers and townsfolk who lived outside the city's walls, and the towers he ordered to be constructed were both shorter and served as little more than platforms to light a large signal fire.

Now, however, if Hugo Hanrahan was correct, they would have to find a way to silence the best early warning system the Hanrahans had at their disposal if they wanted to have any hope of marching on the town unopposed... and short of going to deal with it herself, Heila had no idea how to solve that problem.

Chapter 899: Plans in the Final Hours of Daylight (Part Three)

"Captain Ultrech," Heila said, turning back to the Iron-Tusked captain who had volunteered to deal with the tower. "Can you topple the tower without the men inside ringing the bell?"

"My men aren't slow," he said as he thumped a fist against the thick, heavy, steel breastplate that covered his chest. Unlike the Black Wolf Brigade who wore light armor and fought as skirmishers, the men of the Iron Tusk Clan were heavily armored foot soldiers who carried large axes to fell anything in their path. Despite the weight of their arms and armor, however, they could charge with amazing speed when the situation called for it.

"We aren't slow, but we aren't fast enough to breach a tower and kill its sentries before they can even ring a bell," he admitted reluctantly. "And we'll make quite a racket just trying."

"Then I'll join you for a walk," one of the Glass Eyed captains said as he stretched out his long, sinuous neck to make himself just a little bit taller than his peers. "My aim is good and my bow has the reach to be lethal at more than two hundred paces. Anyone who gets close to the bell gets an arrow for their trouble. Would that be good enough, High One?"

For a moment, Heila said nothing, unconsciously fidgeting with one of the markers on the map that represented her as she wrestled with the question of whether she should go with them to take care of the human watchers or not. With the strength of her witchcraft, it shouldn't be hard to put a tower full of men to sleep and take them prisoner without risking a ringing of the bell, but if she did it, it would mean abandoning her position as the second in command of the army.

"Lady Ashlynn must hate that she can't be with us," Heila said softly as she realized how much she hated the idea of staying behind while others under her command did something that would be riskier and more dangerous because she couldn't go with them... but she couldn't go rushing about everywhere that might benefit from having a witch along with them, just as Lady Ashlynn couldn't be with them now despite the importance of the mission at hand.

"Go with Captain Ultrech then," Heila finally said with a heavy sigh. "But take at least two more archers with you, just in case," she said, though she wasn't entirely certain what kind of situation would require more than a single archer. She was just sure that things had a way of going wrong when you least expected it and a little extra help shouldn't be a bad thing.

Both captains saluted, acknowledging their orders and grinning gloatingly at the other captains now that they had secured the right to spill the first blood of this battle.

"What about Lord Jalal?" Heila asked, turning back to the tiny woman who led their scouts. "Have they seen any sign of him and the men Dame Sybyll asked him to bring?"

"Not a peep, High One," Captain Lusia said. Her whiskers and her large, saucer-shaped ears both drooped in defeat as she admitted they hadn't seen even the faintest trace of the Eldritch Lord of Airgead Mountain despite sending several men to keep an eye out for him. "But Dame Sybyll said he would arrive tonight by sunset."

"We'll just have to hope that he does then," Heila said, giving the other small woman a reassuring look. "The Soft Paws Clan hide almost as well as your people do and they're very fast. If they don't want to be noticed, you probably won't find them."

"Now, is there anything else we need to decide or do before the sun sets and Dame Sybyll can join us?" Heila said as she looked around the command tent. "Otherwise, I need to check on my little brother Hauke about tonight's weather," she said, glancing at the door and wishing that she could escape the feeling of weight piling up on her shoulders with each decision she made and set of orders that she gave.

"Only small things, High One," one of the other captains said helpfully. "Nothing important enough to keep you from speaking to Young Lord Hauke."

"Good," Heila said as she hopped off the stool and looked around the room. "You all know what to do," she said with more confidence than she truly felt. "I'll see you all again when the sun sets and Dame Sybyll joins us for the attack," she said with a slight nod that let her conceal her reddening face under the wide brim of her hat.

Finally, she thought as she turned and fled from the oppressive air of the command tent. She was finally free to do something she actually felt like she understood. Hauke was her 'little brother' in the coven, even though he hadn't received his seed of witchcraft yet, and talking to him about manipulating the weather to create one last blizzard before their attack seemed much, much easier than standing in that room of professional warriors and pretending that she hadn't been a castle maid just a year ago.

Behind her, however, the assembled captains all let out a sigh of relief when she left. Each of them knew that Lady Heila expected them to know their jobs with very little instruction from her and none of them wanted to be the first person to make a mistake with one of the most powerful warriors they'd ever encountered, especially not when she had come dressed for a fight.

Thankfully, they had managed to come up with a solution to the only minor problem they encountered and none of them would have to feel the sting of the whip that was so powerful it made even Tuskan giants nervous.

Now, they just hoped that they were successful enough at doing what they had promised to do to stay on her good side, because none of them ever wanted to find out first hand what Dame Sybyll's second in command would do to them if they fell short of her expectations!

Chapter 900: Loman's Arrival in Hanrahan (Part One)

Loman Lothian rode at the head of a column of soldiers and servants, doing his best to present a calm, confident demeanor to the people of Hanrahan City who either crowded the streets or gazed out at the advancing line of soldiers from the second-story windows of their homes.

They should have arrived in Hanrahan Town more than a day ago, but the sudden winter snowstorm had caught everyone off guard, and Loman's caravan of soldiers had been forced to spend an extra day and night waiting out the worst of the storm before they were able to travel again. Even when they did get back on the road, the snow that stood more than a foot deep across the road and piled up in drifts twice as high where the wind blew slowed them down considerably.

The heavy fur cloak that he wore was enough to keep his torso warm, but his feet felt like blocks of ice in his leather riding boots, and his cheeks were bright pink from the biting, cold wind. Still, he raised his arm and waved at the people as if he were immune to the unnaturally cold weather, presenting them with the most radiant smile many of them had ever seen as they wound their way through Hanrahan Town's winding streets.

To his left and right, Sir Tommin and Inquisitor Diarmuid rode half a horse-length behind him, respectfully allowing the young Lothian Lord to take the lead in deference to his worldly status. Otherwise, as the bearer of a Holy Light Blade, Sir Tommin should have been the one to lead the way.

Behind them, four more templars accompanied Sir Tommin along with twenty soldiers from the Temple Guard, all marching in their glittering coats of brightly polished mail with crimson tabards and matching cloaks. The Lothian forces behind them amounted to another fifty men, though only half of them could be considered soldiers.

The rest were trackers or hunters who had come to help search for the mysterious demons in the wilderness who had been raiding villages, or the servants and their wagons full of supplies to move so many people and horses from Lothian City to Hanrahan Town.

All told, it made for an impressive sight, particularly compared to the more simply equipped soldiers and members of the town watch who Baron Ian Hanrahan had trained to protect his lands.

"Look 'ere son," a proud father said to the young boy riding on his shoulders as they watched the procession of soldiers entering the city. "These is whot propper soldiers from Lothian City look like! See, none of that patchworking the armor, an' I bets they don't have sap all over their axes from chopping wood neither," he said with a toothy, awe filled grin as the men of the temple guard passed by.

"Can I be one 'o 'em one day, da?" the young boy asked with eyes that shined with reflections of brightly polished armor. "If I go off ta tha' church to join tha temple guard, would they take me in?"

"Hey now, none of that!" the boy's father said as he reached up to thump his son on the back of the head. "You'll grow up strong 'an help me wit' the shop is what you'll do!"

Further down the street, Loman did his best to avoid meeting the gazes of the women who lined one side of the road, leaning provocatively against the corners of buildings near quieter alleyways and displaying their considerable charms without reservation.

"Fancy a toss with a country lass, boys?" one woman called as she twirled her reddish-blond hair around a fingertip. "Two fer one special if ye'll buy a girl a drink first," she cooed.

"Wasting yer time, Bethany," another woman said as she strained to see further down the road. "Wait till the crimson-cloaked gents from the Church pass by, you won't get a single coin from them anyway."

"I wouldn'a say that, Tise," the first woman said with a flirtatious look directed at the neatly ordered ranks of soldiers from the Temple Guard. "Church men pay the best so long as ye promise no one ever hears their name from yer lips," she said. "And my lips only do what their paid to..."

Loman shuddered in his saddle as he listened to the ribald banter, eager to move beyond the rougher, chaotic, outer areas of Hanrahan Town in favor of the Baron's keep at the center of town.

Still, as they rode, his eyes couldn't help but take in the number of families caught out in the cold, holding out their hands as they stood in front of homes with caved-in roofs, covered in snow that had fallen far too suddenly.

"Please, yer lordships," a woman said as she clutched two small children to her side. "A few snips fer firewood or a penny for a bit of meat..."

"Yer lordships! Please, take me in," another man said, eagerly holding up and filled with carpenter's tools. "I can work fer me wages, a few snips a day an' I'll mend yer wagons or..."

"Oh Holy men," another man pleaded with tears streaming down his face and a shovel standing in the snow beside him. "Me wife an' child, they's under the snow," he said as he looked at the partially collapsed second story of his home. "Please, help me dig them out... I know they's dead already but... but...."

The man's anguished cries filled the chill morning air, echoing off the nearby buildings and silencing the excited exclamations of children at the sight of so many armored men and horses. On both sides of the street, other townsfolk who had been waiting to make their own pleas for help from the newly arrived lords held their tongues in shame as their grievances felt petty by comparison to their neighbor's loss.

And a few people, those who felt that Lord Loman or the men from the church might have taken pity on them, looked on with intense hostility at the man who had suddenly made himself the center of attention for the entire length of the street...