

The Vampire 901

Chapter 901: Loman's Arrival in Hanrahan (Part Two)

"Stop!" Loman called to the column of soldiers, holding up a hand before he dropped out of his saddle and strode through the muddy, slushy snow on the cobblestone road to reach the widower.

"What happened, goodman?" Loman asked as he reached out to put a hand on the other man's shoulder, feeling the bone-deep cold, weariness, and despair that had seeped into the man's bones.

"It, it happened last night, yer lordship," he man said, momentarily startled that anyone had bothered to listen to his pleas. "I, I weren't home, but, but when I came back this morning after tha snow stopped, it were like this, yer lordship," he said as his shoulders shook with a combination of suppressed sobs and shivering from the cold. "Me wife, Saela an' me daughter, Hannah, she's only two winters old, yer lordship, they were home alone when it happened an' now... now..."

The man couldn't make himself say it again. It had been hours since the roof caved in, and there was no way that they had survived, trapped under the snow through half the night and all the morning, but he couldn't rest until he saw them with his own eyes.

"Don't pity Dannil, yer lordship," a gray haired woman standing outside a small shop selling woolen goods said. "He were out drinkin' an' whorin' all night long. He's alive fer runnin' out on Saela in tha night, yer lordship. If he'd'a been 'ere like a real husband an' father, he'd a been 'ere ta' dig 'em out instead'a leavin' 'em 'ere ta' die."

"It doesn't matter," Loman said as he supported the man who nearly collapsed under the weight of his neighbor's condemnation. "This is his struggle to meet, and he's asking for help doing what's right. The Holy Lord of Light illuminates our path to transform stranger into neighbor and neighbor into friend because no man is meant to bear his struggles alone," Loman recited.

"Besides," he added in a more somber tone. "The dead deserve to rest on pyres tonight to make their way to the Heavenly Shores," Loman said as he looked around the street and took in the number of broken homes that lined the street.

"How did a single winter storm cause so much damage?" Loman asked the gray haired woman. "It shouldn't be like this, even for a sudden storm."

This home was already the third one he'd seen with a collapsed roof, just along a single street, and there were many more that creaked and groaned under the weight of snow atop their roofs. The number of people out in the street who had come to beg for help was also a surprise to the Lothian lord. In Lothian City, he had done much to support the poor and the people who had no where to live, but this was the first time he'd seen people holding out their hands because they'd lost half their home in a single night, or encountered people who were doing well enough to have a roof over their heads who died as a result of the storm.

"We still havn'a recovered from tha' Demon Storm, yer lordship," the aging shop keeper said. "We's all done our best, but not every man can mend 'is own roof after that nightmare 'an no one comin' down from on high ta'..."

"Enough, Cattea!" another neighbor snapped from nearby, interrupting her before she could speak ill of Baron Hanrahan and how little he had done to help the people in the outer areas of Hanrahan when they needed to repair their thatched roofs and broken shutters after the horrible storm that had come along with the demon raids on the caravans carrying the tithes from villages.

"His lordship don't want ta hear our troubles," the neighbor said firmly, hoping that his scolding would save her from a public flogging for embarrassing the nobility. "We take care of our own, yer lordship," the man said as he made an awkward bow in the street. "No need fer ye to waste yer time on us now. A few snips if you have 'em to hire a couple local boys wit' shovels will be more 'an generous to Dannil 'ere."

"No, no, it isn't enough," Loman insisted as he turned to look at the Lothian soldiers marching behind the Temple Guard. "Captain Vebra! Bring up your men and some shovels from the wagons. We didn't just come to fight demons," he said as he turned back to the folk lining the street. "We came to help."

"Captain," Loman said, speaking loudly enough for the whole crowd to hear. "Stay with the people until dusk. If there are others like Dannil here with loved ones buried in their homes, see that they're dug out so they can know the warmth of a pyre and follow its light to the Heavenly Shores. Then, if you have solved all that, help the people shore up their homes. Too many people here have lost more than they should. Take care of them."

"The Temple Guard will help as well," Sir Tommin said as he slid off of his saddle and joined Loman in the street. "Sir Jusip," he added, turning to one of the templars who was still sitting astride his horse.

"Ride to the temple and speak with the Priest in charge about building pyres for a service at sunset. And find out if his kitchens can prepare food for the people who need it," Tommin added as he fished into a pouch at his hip and passed the man a pair of gold sovereigns. "No one should go to bed hungry, cold or alone tonight."

"Thank you, Sir Tommin," Loman said with a warm smile for the recently elevated templar whose gaze remained fixed on the house buried beneath the snow. "I know you miss your wife and child," he said quietly. "But I'm sure they're doing well. Hurel Village is very large and far from the borders with the demons. They should be safe, even with all of this going on..."

"I know they are," Sir Tommin said as he forced himself to give the young Lothian lord a reassuring smile. "Bors is a good lord for the whole march, and you'll be a good one too. I wish I could be there to watch over my boy, but if I can't... At least I'm helping you to take care of everyone, and that will be better for them than the alternative."

As the two men spoke, several soldiers began to move, taking up not only shovels to clear snow, but hammers, axes and saws to repair roofs, working side by side with the locals to help clear away the effects of the earliest and worst winter storm Hanrahan Town had faced in living memory.

At the same time, Loman Lothian and Sir Tommin Pyre's name spread through the streets like wildfire, long after the lords themselves along with the leaders of their forces had marched the rest of the way to Baron Hanrahan's manor.

The snow had finally stopped falling and when the sun appeared, it brought with it two saviors who would help them in a way no other lord cared to... From the Demon Storm to what some were already calling the Winter Blight, the people of Hanrahan had suffered greatly in the past few weeks, but their luck was finally beginning to change and they had Lord Loman and Sir Tommin to thank for it!

Chapter 902: A Lordly Welcome

Word of Loman and Sir Tommin's generosity reached Baron Ian Hanrahan's ears mere minutes before the Lothian lord himself rode into the central courtyard of Hanrahan Keep. While the portly baron had received reports of damage from across Hanrahan Town, his response had been far more restrained than that of their guests.

Ian Hanrahan had already sent men to help the town's bakers and to clear the streets of snow so that wagons could move between the storehouses and the market square. If the bakers couldn't get wood

for their ovens or burned through their stores of flour and salt, he knew that he'd have riots in the street within a day.

At the same time, he'd sent men to a number of the wealthiest and most influential families in Hanrahan Town to ensure that they hadn't suffered undue hardship in this storm. The last thing he needed was for the fattened sows who accounted for a third of his yearly tithes to decide that they should move to Lothian City or, worse, the Town of Dunn once winter was over.

The storm had been severe enough that Ian Hanrahan knew he couldn't rely on the townsfolk to take care of everything that needed doing by themselves, but he'd expected the commoners who lived in the shadows of the city's walls to do a better job of helping their neighbors and doing as the priests commanded that peasants should do in times like these. They were supposed to be 'meeting their struggle,' not holding their hands out for charity as soon as Loman Lothian arrived with his soldiers.

And if his own people's weakness and selfishness weren't bad enough, the Lothian lord had actually indulged their begging! He was supposed to be a man of the Church, but where was the stern lecture about pious suffering that a real priest should have delivered? Instead, he and his Templar followers had pledged gold, not simple silver but actual gold, to help feed the people of his town during the crisis, and they'd done it in full view of the common folk!

It took a tremendous act of will for the Hanrahan Baron to smooth the lines of frustration from his features and plaster on a welcoming, subservient grin as he walked out of his fortress to welcome the young lord who had just thoroughly humiliated him with his act of 'kindness.'

"Lord Loman," the portly, balding baron gushed as his boots crunched through the snow. "I'm so glad to see that you and your party arrived safely. If we hadn't seen you by tonight, I would have sent riders to search for you," he said as he made a grand gesture of bowing to the young lord, nearly overbalancing and falling in the snow in the process as one foot found an icy patch in the middle of his sweeping bow.

"Thankfully, you don't need to waste your men's time looking for us," Loman said with a strained smile on his face. He'd finally seen where the baron's men were 'helping', clearing the roads in front of the large estates within the town and helping a merchant move his goods from a damaged storehouse to a different storehouse nearby, preserving finely carved furnishings instead of doing work that would preserve people's lives.

But he hadn't come here to quarrel with the baron, and Loman reminded himself of that fact every time he saw places where the man seemed intent on neglecting his people. Right now, what mattered were

the demons who had appeared with the last storm, and the ones who might be lurking in the wilderness even now, waiting to take advantage of this storm.

"Well, it's good that you're here, Lord Loman, Sir Tommin, Inquisitor Diarmuid," Ian said as he gave a slight welcoming nod to the other men accompanying Lord Loman. "But you've been out in the cold too long."

"Come, come inside," he said as he gestured to the open doors of the keep. "I've prepared a welcoming feast, just for you. It should be the perfect thing to wash away the chill that clings to the bones when you come in from the cold."

The last time Ian Hanrahan had received Owain Lothian, he kept the gathering small at the request of the man he had once believed would be the next Lothian Marquis. After all, that visit had been intended to bring the Guild Masters of Blackwell County into the fold as Ian Hanrahan's new vassals. An ostentatious display worthy of Owain Lothian's stature might have given the merchants an inflated sense of their own importance, and so he'd kept things fairly subdued.

Now, however, with his son reporting that Bors Lothian seemed to be abandoning his eldest son in favor of the younger one, Baron Hanrahan wasn't about to miss this opportunity to make a good impression on the visiting lord, especially not when he needed his help and the influence that Loman commanded with the Church in order to purge the demon raiders from his lands.

Every hearth in the great hall burned brightly, keeping the vast hall warm enough that the people inside could set aside their fur cloaks and forget that there was still snow on the ground just outside the freshly scrubbed glass windows of the keep.

A dozen tables had been arranged in six, V-shaped rows leading to the high table, and the importance of the guests sitting at each table only grew the closer to the front of the hall the table had been placed. More than a hundred people packed into the hall, including knights, prosperous merchants, and even the head priest of the local temple, all standing as the baron entered the hall to welcome their lord and his esteemed guests.

The smell of savory, roasted meats filled the hall and two of the large hearths even sported roasting spits where serving boys carefully turned a whole boar and deer, collecting the drippings in a long pan beneath the freshly hunted game and ladling those drippings back over the roast nearly constantly to ensure that the texture and flavor of the meat remained as succulent as the master of kitchens commanded.

To the side of the great hall, a full dozen musicians played bright, stirring music on harps, drums, and even sets of high-pitched reed pipes that were favored at gatherings in Lothian City. At the same time, at the front of the hall, a trio of performers was putting on a show of juggling brightly colored balls with tails of multi-colored silk that fluttered in the air as they passed from hand to hand.

It was an incredible display of abundance and prosperity, from tables filled with the finest dishes of the barony to the best musicians in town and even lively performers. If Baron Hanrahan had been receiving Owain Lothian, it certainly would have put a smile on the young lord's face, especially when he realized that Baron Hanrahan had asked several of the prominent families with eligible daughters of bedable age to bring them to the feast.

Loman Lothian, however, was a different matter entirely, and Ian Hanrahan pressed his hands tightly together as he watched for the young lord's reaction to the reception he'd been given...

Chapter 903: A Gathering of Shameful Opportunists

Loman looked around the Hanrahan great hall and fought back the urge to berate the assembled guests as if he were still a priest, speaking from the pulpit.

Everywhere he looked, he saw fresh, full faces that lacked any traces of the lean, harsh lifestyle he'd seen in the sunken cheeks and bony figures of the townsfolk he'd met in the poorest, outer areas of the town.

Here on the edge of civilization, as close to the frontier and the border with the demons who infested Airgead Mountain as a person could build a sizeable town, it was expected that conditions could be harsh. Raids in the fall and winter claimed the lives and livestock of many farmers every year, even if they weren't on the scale of what had recently befallen the barony.

Even without raids, the conditions could be harsh, supplies from Lothian City and elsewhere in the Kingdom of Gaal were difficult to obtain, and simple illness claimed many lives each year. To live on the frontier meant that a man could live free, sustaining himself and providing for his family with his own honest work without becoming a bondsman for years just to obtain a deed to his farm.

It also meant facing a harder struggle than most people in the Kingdom of Gaal could imagine, where a single bad storm could tear whole families apart. Yet to look at the people here, it would be difficult to

believe that they weren't in the halls of a manor in Lothian City. The men wore tunics of the finest wool, embroidered with copper and silver thread, and their fingers glittered with heavy rings, while the fragments of conversation that reached Loman's ears were enough to sour his stomach.

"I'm telling you, Aslac, this storm is an opportunity to the first ones who can move," a slender man with several silver chain necklaces hanging down his ruffled tunic said, gesturing emphatically with his goblet of wine. "If you don't have a carriage and strong horses who can take you out in the snow, I'm willing to bring you along with me as a partner in this venture."

"Venture? I know you think yourself clever, Yvar, but what kind of mad venture would take a man out in this weather when there are demons lurking about?" Aslac asked as he cut into a large cut of beef steak on his plate before stuffing a mouthful of the succulent beef that was still pink enough to look bloody into his mouth.

"You've seen the damage here in town," the first man explained. "Think of how much worse it is for the outlying farms and villages. Mark my words, there are widows and orphans out there who will be lucky to survive the winter," he said after taking a sip of his wine.

"If those farmers die over the harsh winter," Yvar continued. "Then their deeds revert back to Baron Hanrahan or whichever local knight rules the area, but if there's a widow or an orphan who's still alive, then they can sign it over to one of us for enough coin to survive the winter and a trip back to the nearest town or village."

"Do you really think we'll get away with something so brazen?" Aslac countered. "I promise you, if you can think of it, Baron Hanrahan can as well. I bet five sovereigns that he's already planning on reclaiming those deeds to sell them to rich men from Lothian City in the spring! If we cut into his profits, it'll be our heads that roll."

"You think I don't know our baron?" Yvar countered. "I've already spoken to the Head Priest about doing some 'charity work' for the Church, venturing out into the weather to find widows and orphans and bring them back to the Church. We'll have the cover of doing the Holy Lord of Light's work and be hailed as heroes for risking our lives to rescue women and children from the snow and the demons..."

"Besides," the scheming merchant added. "No matter how much we snap up, there are sure to be farms we miss and people who won't sell or don't succumb until the end of winter. Baron Hanrahan will still get his share in the end, so he won't mind the crumbs we swipe from his table..."

The pair of merchants wasn't the only ones looking to line their pockets in the midst of the tragedy. At another table, the owner of most of the town's saw mills had launched into a lively argument about how much the price of timber could be increased without sparking protests, while the owner of an ironworks bemoaned the fact that he would likely sell little more than buckets of nails to people rebuilding their homes over the winter.

Everywhere Loman looked, the people with power and wealth in Hanrahan Town were openly discussing how to acquire more of both on the backs of the people who suffered the most because of the storm. The women in the hall, however, were looking for entirely different opportunities.

Compared to the men in the hall, the women were even more elegant, especially the young ones who had been brought out specifically to catch the eye of the young Lothian lord and any of his companions with vices to indulge in. Bodices were cut low and deep valleys of cleavage were framed with fine lace or adorned with glittering necklaces, while elaborately embroidered corsets nipped in waists that were already elegant and willowy.

"Look, Roseen," a straw-haired woman with a lithe figure that could almost be called boyish said as she pointed at the arriving lords. "Lord Loman looks even more handsome and dashing now that he's out of his priestly robes than he did this spring."

"Since when do you know Lord Loman, Cossot?" asked a raven-haired woman with assets that were as generous as her friends were sparse. "You've been boasting about watching Lady Ashlynn's wedding all year, but if you tell me that you spoke with Lord Loman, I will call you a liar to your face."

"I only said two or three words," Cossot said, smiling smugly at her shorter, curvier companion. "My father is one of the best whitesmiths in the march, you know. He supplied some of the decorations for the wedding, and he personally poured the constellation mobile that Baron Hanrahan gave Lady Ashlynn to hang above the crib of her firstborn. Lord Loman even praised the work, saying it would bring good fortune to his niece or nephew to sleep beneath the stars of the heavens."

"And now you think you can use that to slip into his bed?" Roseen said boldly. "You know that even if he's left the Church to be a lord, he'll never marry a commoner. Your chances of bedding him are as good as my chances of touching the stars in the heavens."

"I wouldn't dream of marrying him," Cossot said, blushing fiercely as the idea of wearing a beautiful white gown like Lady Ashlynn's and walking down the aisle of the grand temple in Lothian City to wed Loman Lothian flickered through her mind. "But when he marries, if he needs a nurse-maid for his children, wouldn't it be good to be 'close at hand'? And I could help him 'practice' for his wedding night..."

Loman's face heated at the bold suggestions put forward by the gossiping women as he realized that he was the most 'eligible' and desirable guest of the occasion. Of course, the daughters of the wealthy merchants were only looking for opportunities to worm their way into his bed, either for a night during his stay or as a way to escape the small town life of Hanrahan Town by entering his service on a more permanent basis.

It was the chatter about the daughter of one of the knights in attendance, however, that turned Loman's embarrassment into slow simmering fury.

"Did you hear that Sir Thorryn Quarrie brought his daughter to offer up as a lady-in-waiting when Lord Loman takes a bride?" one woman said, more loudly than she intended after her second cup of strong wine.

"No, that can't be!" another woman said in disbelief. "Drema Quarrie is only twelve years old, she's far too young to have her maidenhood offered up to anyone."

"Old enough to catch a lord's eye," the first woman countered. "And you know how those noblemen are. Some like to 'train' girls young. Lord Loman was a priest, he'll only want a woman he knows is pure and picking her up so soon..."

The very idea that he would want to touch a girl who wasn't even a woman yet was almost enough to make Loman march over to the table to berate the women for their gossip. What kind of holy man would dare to touch an innocent child? Did these people think that he'd turned into his brother, Owain, the instant he took off his vestments?

But as much as the gossip about him and his preferences infuriated him, there was an element of the gathering that got under his skin even more in the wake of the tragedy that they'd witnessed as they arrived in Hanrahan Town.

Outside of the Barons' keep, people were hungry, cold, and digging their deceased loved ones out of collapsed homes. Meanwhile, there was an obscene amount of food piled up on the tables of the great hall. More than enough to feed every man, woman, and child sitting at the table four times over and encompassing everything from freshly slaughtered venison and boar to tarts baked with sweet, crisp apples brought all the way from Kade barony.

Taken in with everything else, and perhaps because of the needles of other conversations that had worked their way under his skin as he scanned the great hall, Loman could no longer hold himself back as he turned to the portly baron, choosing his words with great care as he searched for a way to give vent to the seething feelings in his heart...

Chapter 904: Chasing Justice's Elusive Shadow

"This is quite the welcome, Baron Hanrahan," Loman said diplomatically as he surveyed the opulence and excess on display in the great hall. "I had thought that the raids and the storms must be a great strain on the people of Hanrahan," he said as he turned his attention to Baron Ian and his son Bastian.

"Clearly, I underestimated how resilient your people are, and how deep and strong the roots they've sunk into the soil of the barony," Loman praised. "I'll be sure to let my father and his steward know that young lord Bastian must have been mistaken about your ability to make your spring and summer tithes."

Behind him, Inquisitor Diarmuid smiled, and his dark eyes glittered with approval as he watched the former priest take a very direct but calculated stand against the Baron's excess while his people faced crisis. It would have been a step too far to suggest that the food on the tables should be given to the poor and needy outside in the cold. Such a statement would come as a direct challenge to the Baron's character and authority in front of all of the important figures in his territory.

However, by framing it as Bastian's mistake, Loman both absolved the Baron of any blame for wrongdoing and simultaneously clawed back the concessions Bors Lothian had made to their tithes in the coming year. The slap would actually hurt Baron Hanrahan much more than a simple rebuke about his handling of the current crisis would, but he could protest it far less.

While Diarmuid would have far preferred to see swift justice done for the people who were struggling to keep themselves warm tonight, he had long come to accept the circumspect way in which noblemen like the baron and the Lothian heir apparent negotiated concessions without calling direct attention to their very real failings. So long as the former priest was still willing to stand up for what was right, Diarmuid would find ways to give him what support he could.

"Surely you jest, young Lord Loman," Baron Hanrahan said with a deep, belly-shaking laugh as he wrapped an arm around Loman's shoulders and began guiding him toward the high table at the head of the great hall. "I know that Bastian can exaggerate a bit at times, he's a good son who wants to do the best he can for his father and the barony that will be his one day soon."

"But I assure you," Ian Hanrahan added as he gave his son a knowing look. "The facts and figures my son reported were verified by my own personal Steward before he left for Lothian City. He wouldn't have dared to report anything different, not to a single bushel of cabbage or sack of flour!"

"No, Father, I wouldn't dream of it," Bastian said quickly as he stepped in to support his father. "The losses from places like Raek Village, where an entire caravan was taken, were just as extensive as we've said. Combined with the damage from the storm," he said helplessly as he offered a shrug. "It really is just as we've said. You can inspect the ledgers yourself if you'd like."

Of course, the set of ledgers that were maintained for inspection by representatives of the Lothian Court was very different from the ledgers kept in the Baron's chambers. A few casks of meat here, a ton of flour there... Eights that became sixes in official ledgers, or nines that became eights, they were all things that could be dismissed as simple errors if there was ever a dispute, but each of them added up to a tidy sum for the barony each year when the final accounting was due at year's end.

Of course, it never would have become so hard to detect without Hugo's help during the time that Bastian had been recovering from his fall. As much as the young lord despised his bastard brother, he had to admit that the cowardly scholar had paid back the money their father invested in having him educated in Keating Duchy. Now, Bastian had every confidence that the ledgers would stand up to any inspection, even if it were to be conducted by the Marquis's own steward.

"This display is only the least of what such important guests are due," Ian Hanrahan said with a warm, ingratiating smile. "My liege lord's own son comes to visit and help rescue us from demons, bringing with him an Inquisitor and a Templar who bears a Holy Light Blade. How could my courtesy be anything less than this?"

"We might face a lean winter as the months wear on," the portly baron said smoothly, with an expression that looked like he feared the difficulties ahead. "But I won't have it be said that our courtesy is lacking, or that we aren't loyal to the Lothian House and pious before the chosen hands of the Holy Lord of Light," he said, letting the words roll off his tongue with practiced ease that would put the star of a theatre troupe to shame.

"We appreciate the welcome of such a pious lord," Diarmuid said as he took an extra half step to match strides with Baron Hanrahan. "Since I'm certain that your lordship has heard of the great tragedies in the outer quarters of Hanrahan Town, perhaps you've heard that there will be a number of pyres lit at the temple when the sun sets."

"Can we count on your attendance to send the most unfortunate of your people off on their journey to the Heavenly shores or the next life that awaits them?" Diarmuid asked as he raised a dark brow at the portly baron.

"Come now, Inquisitor, isn't that a bit much?" a rich, cultured voice said from the high table as they arrived to take their seats. "The gathering tonight belongs to the common folk. How can they open their hearts and let out their feelings for their loved ones if they must remain stoic and proper before their liege lord?"

The man who spoke wore the same white and gold robes that Loman had once worn as a priest of the Holy Lord of Light. The only difference was that Germot wore a heavy emblem around his neck, depicting the sun on one side and a star-filled sky on the other, marking him as the Head Priest of the local temple.

Just a few months ago, Loman would have bowed respectfully to the council of an elder whose dull brown hair was already starting to turn silver with his advancing age and growing wisdom, but today, Loman's perspective had changed too much to accept the words at face value.

"Perhaps they would find it stifling, Head Priest Germot," Loman carefully acknowledged, though he refused to give up on pressuring the Hanrahan lord over the issue. "But perhaps they would also find it heartening to know that their lord mourned their losses alongside them," in the hopes that forcing the Baron to directly confront his grieving people would force him to do something, anything, more than he already was to care for the people who were caught up in this tragedy.

"There will be many more losses to mourn in the days to come if we can't cleanse our lands of this demon scourge," Baron Hanrahan said as he finally found the opportunity to put the young lord on his back foot that he'd been seeking in their slippery conversation.

"Please, join us all," he said as he gestured to the most important guests gathered at the high table. "And tell us, how exactly are you going to track down these insidious demons who vanish like mist and pillage as they please? How are you going to make my barony safe again?"

Chapter 905: Not Safe (Part One)

"How exactly are you going to track down these insidious demons who vanish like mist and pillage as they please? How are you going to make my barony safe again?"

Loman had only just taken his seat at the high table when Baron Hanrahan's provocative words rang out across the hall, stilling tongues and drawing all eyes in the great hall to the young lord, along with the Inquisitor and Templar who accompanied him.

It was a topic that Loman was prepared to discuss, one that he'd spent several days considering and debating with Sir Tommin and Diarmuid during the extended trip from Lothian City to Hanrahan Town.

But it was also a plan that required Baron Hanrahan's support, and Loman realized too late that by pressing the baron over the matter of the common folk in the outer quarters of the town and the baron's tithes, he'd squandered his opportunity to take advantage of the baron's attempts to curry favor.

"Your barony will never be safe so long as demons can hide in their nests and burrows in the wilderness, Baron Hanrahan," Loman said as he quickly marshaled his thoughts and went back on the offensive. "So long as demons infest Airgead Mountain, your barony will not be safe. So long as the Horse Lord roams the Southern Steppe, your barony will not be safe."

"And so long as the Demon Lady of the Vale haunts us on every front," Loman added with a pointed gaze that swept over the knights and officials sitting at the high table. "Your barony will never know peace or safety."

"Well said!" Inquisitor Diarmuid said before either Baron Hanrahan or Head Priest Germot could say anything to counter the young lord's words. "These new demons are a threat we must purge from your lands with Holy Flames until nothing remains but consecrated ashes, but putting an end to this threat will not make Hanrahan Town or the Barony 'safe' from the demons. Not the way the lands of Keating Duchy, the Holy City, or the Royal Capital are 'safe' from demons."

At the center of the high table, a slight frown appeared on Baron Hanrahan's face as he felt the young Lothian Lord and the Inquisitor snatching back the momentum of the conversation by acting like they were priests speaking to a congregation.

Glancing down the length of the table, the baron met the gaze of one of his knights, making a subtle gesture with the knife that he'd been using to pile slices of roast venison on his plate and nodding slightly in the direction of the young girl sitting next to the knight before pointing subtly at Loman.

It was obvious to the baron that Loman intended to whip up an atmosphere of fervor for fighting demons before pressing him to lend his men to the fight, but Ian had been playing this game far too long to fall into such an obvious trap, especially when he had pawns who could speak up for him, and the first man he chose knew his lord well enough to know what was expected of him.

"Every man of the frontier knows that we're never truly safe from the demons, Inquisitor," a sandy-haired knight with a long, well-trimmed beard said with a touch of defensiveness in his voice. Sir Thorryn Quarrie was too young to have been more than a squire during the War of Inches, but the bright-eyed girl who looked to be ten to twelve years old looked at him with eyes that sparkled as if she was gazing up at a great war hero.

"We're all prepared to fight in the coming Holy War, to drive the demons from our lands at last and claim our rightful place as the masters of everything from the sea to the mountains," the bearded knight continued. "But the demons in the wilderness haven't strayed away from their nests in numbers like these for as long as I've been lord of Tremlan Village."

"My people are worried that they won't be safe behind the village walls this winter," Sir Thorryn added with a deep scowl as he wrapped a protective arm around his young daughter, using her like a prop to remind everyone at the gathering about the tender children who could only depend on the adults in the room to keep them safe from the ruthless demons.

At the center of the table, Ian Hanrahan smiled and gave a subtle nod of approval while he savored the rich, earthy flavor of the venison that was even more intense when combined with generous amounts of dark mushroom gravy. As he chewed, he gave a subtle sign to the knight who sat furthest from him, though the message clearly didn't land as well as it had with Sir Thorryn.

At the end of the table, the youngest knight in Hanrahan Town nodded in silent agreement as he wrapped a protective arm around the equally young woman sitting next to him, joining Sir Thorryn in making a display of someone weak and vulnerable who needed protection from the demons. Sir Niall Hane hadn't even been born yet when the War of Inches ended, and his face was so smooth and fresh that it was clear the young man didn't need to shave more than once a week.

Normally, he wouldn't yet be considered the lord of his village, but when the winter chills claimed his father's life last year, he'd been left with no choice but to assume the mantle of lord of Kyanden Village. The past year had been so hard that there had been several moments where he wanted to quit, but when he finally rode into Hanrahan Town with his village's autumn tithe, he finally began to feel like all of the hardship and suffering had been worth it.

Once word got out that Sir Niall had come to Hanrahan Town not just to bring his tithe, but to search for a wife in either Hanrahan Town or Lothian City, there had been no shortage of charming young women who were eager to spend time with him, and several families had approached him about making investments in Kyanden.

The young woman sitting next to him hadn't been the first to make a move, but she'd been the one who most stirred his heart, and he was eager to bring her back home to his village, but she would never marry him if demons destroyed that village before he could even propose!

Seeing that the young knight was too inexperienced to step in and speak up, Ian resolved to have words with the young man about what he expected from him in return for his efforts to play matchmaker with the town's wealthiest families.

A few words of concern about trying to start a family while demons raided with impunity, or even an admission of being afraid to take his prospective wife home to his village right now, would have gone a long way to making the threat feel even more dire, and the young knight had the least reputation to lose in admitting to fear at his age.

But it seemed like Baron Hanrahan had overestimated the simple, inexperienced country knight, and so he gestured to an older, more seasoned veteran who sat much closer to him to step in next.

Pawns would be pawns, after all, the baron thought as he saw understanding in the eyes of the old man he'd chosen to make the next move. If one pawn failed to advance, he only needed to push out the next one in order to clear the way to his inevitable victory over the young Lothian Lord who would soon learn that even a future Marquis needed to be careful about provoking his barons.

Chapter 906: Not Safe (Part Two)

"I know you want to stir us up to fight," a white haired knight said from his seat close to Baron Hanrahan as he took up the conversation and kept it moving in the direction that Lord Ian clearly wanted it to move. "It's good to remember that the demons are always lurking out there in the dark," he added as he

took a heavy swig of wine. "But in more than fifty years, I've never seen the demons act like this. No demon has attacked villages in Hanrahan Barony since my father fought in the War of Four Templars."

Of course, that had been in an era when Baron Brighton Hanrahan had been alive and he had invested substantially in building a network of watch towers across the border to warn the people of impending demon raids. He'd nearly emptied the treasury to have giant bells cast from bronze that could be heard across an entire valley when they rang out, but after seeing the horror of the demons in the War of Four Templars he'd been willing to do whatever it took to keep his people safe from the threat of demonic retribution.

Around the table, several people nodded at Sir Dollin Halsall's words. Even during the War of Inches on Airgead Mountain, few demons, if any, had ever reached their villages to threaten them. Raids on outlying farms still happened from time to time, and the great bells still rang out on occasion but even those raids were rare compared to the stories that many of them had grown up on and the people had become accustomed to a certain level of safety.

So when Loman Lothian said that they wouldn't be safe until the demons were purged from all the lands between the mountains and the sea... the words that had been meant to remind them of the threat that had always been there rang a bit hollow. They had been safe behind the walls of Hanrahan Town or their own villages, but now, if they couldn't even bring a caravan of goods to market without fearing a demon raid, then they weren't safe behind their walls, they were prisoners within them.

"You've only known that sort of safety because men like Liam Dunn, Owain Lothian and Baron Tybal Aleese have been raiding demon nests and burning out their dens almost every year between the great wars," Sir Tommin reminded everyone at the table, breaking his silence at last when he realized that Loman was rapidly losing ground to Baron Hanrahan's coordinated pressure.

A technique like this would never have worked against Owain Lothian. Sir Tommin had seen men like Baron Hanrahan try only to be swatted down and mauled like the victim of a bear attack as Owain bludgeoned them with his accomplishments and shamed them for failing to ride out with him against the demons. But against Loman Lothian, the young lord seemed to have little to nothing to counter with.

As much as Sir Tommin had come to loathe the man that Owain Lothian had become as he fell more and more into the sort of debauchery that Sir Kaefin corrupted him with, there was one thing that Sir Tommin couldn't deny. Owain Lothian had killed more demons bordering more territories of Lothian March than anyone sitting at the table and he included himself in that figure.

Liam Dunn and Baron Tybal Aleese were cut from the same cloth. The only differences were that the Dunns used their raids to continually expand their domain while Baron Tybal Aleese had long ago accepted that it was impossible to gain territory where the nomadic Horse Lord held sway. But both men pushed the conflict beyond their own borders, keeping the unending skirmishes with the demons as far from their own villagers as they could.

If there was peace and safety for the common folk, it had been purchased with blood spilled across a decade of small conflicts in battles too small to have names, by men who knew they were only sharpening their swords for the next great war.

"That's true," Sir Dollin said, yielding to the younger knight without hesitation. He'd seen Sir Tommin accompanying Owain Lothian each summer in raids along the borders for years and he knew the man was being humble when he excluded his own name from the list of men who had kept the villages of the frontier safe for many years.

"But this is still something very different from what we have known before," the white haired knight insisted. "My lord, Hanrahan is right to ask how we are supposed to fight back against such a threat. At the moment, we haven't been able to do more than huddle behind our walls like frightened turtles and it feels... distasteful," he said with a sour expression on his face.

"I know you dislike it, Sir Dollin," Head Priest Germot said in a calm, soothing tone. After so many years working hand in hand with Baron Hanrahan to keep the people of Hanrahan town in line, toiling in their struggle to provide for those who had earned higher places in life, the aging priest knew what was expected of him at this dinner without needing prompting from the portly baron.

"But it truly has been the wisest course of action," the priest continued. "I have acolytes walking the town's walls every day, praying over the stones and blessing the gates so that no demon can survive touching them, much less climbing them," he said confidently.

"When the snow clears, my temple is also willing to send an acolyte to travel with caravans, to pray over our knights and merchants," the priest continued. Of course, the Church would collect an appropriate 'donation' for offering that service, but the people at the table were all experienced enough to understand the nuance without having it spelled out for them.

"The Holy Lord of Light will shield our people should the demons come again, but this is the most my temple can do," Head Priest Germot said. "Anything more than that will require talents that we simply don't possess within my small, humble temple," he said as he spread his hands helplessly.

Sitting in the central seat at the table, Ian Hanrahan smiled as his pawns each made their moves. From Sir Thorryn to Head Priest Germot, each of them knew what he expected of them and they played their parts well, pressuring the young Lothian lord about the 'threat' of these demon raids and placing responsibility for dealing with them squarely where it belonged.

If Bastian was right about what he'd seen, Loman Lothian might very well become the next Marquis, but he was still far too inexperienced at playing this game to make Baron Hanrahan take a loss over a single meal, especially one hosted within his own keep! Now, he just needed to give a small push and things should fall neatly into place.

"Lord Loman," Ian Hanrahan said as he set down his knife and fork and looked directly into the young lord's eyes. "I know that you have served as a priest until recently, but my people need answers that extend beyond faith and sermons. We are facing an unprecedented threat from the demons this winter."

"So please, tell us," the baron said with a calculating smile. "You have the most powerful force in the entire barony under your command. What is it that you will do with that force to put an end to this menace?"

Chapter 907: Loman's Sermon (Part One)

For a moment, everyone in the hall looked at Loman as if he were a helpless deer, ready to be skewered on Ian Hanrahan's sharp words, before admitting that he couldn't accomplish his goal without pleading for the baron's help. It was a moment that would lower Loman's standing in the eyes of Hanrahan Barony and across the whole of Lothian March for years to come.

But Loman wore a strange, barely noticeable smile on his face as he listened to the blustering and jockeying for position taking place at the table. It was as if, somehow, the entire conversation was beneath his notice, or at least beneath his concern. And in truth, it was.

The people were afraid, and the careful statements made by the knights revealed deep-seated worries for their villages, while even Head Priest Germot felt like he was powerless to do more than cling to the security and safety offered by the mighty stone walls of Hanrahan Town.

The demons were lurking in the dark, and the people were frightened. For the lords of Lothian March, it was rare to feel such a fear so directly and so personally. They lived behind the walls of their villages in fortified manors and keeps. Men like Baron Hanrahan even had a second set of walls around his keep to take shelter behind.

Moreover, few lords or knights ever fell to the demons, but in the days between a fierce thunderstorm and an unprecedented early snowstorm, one of the most celebrated knights of the young generation, Sir Carwyn Belvin, had been defeated by a terrifying demon-knight. Sir Rain and Sir Hugo Hanrahan were both missing, and many feared that they had died in the raid. Just months ago, Sir Broll had died such a gruesome death that parts of his body were never found.

Knights and the sons of lords were dying. No one felt safe. The people who ruled from the security of their fortresses finally felt the cold breath of death on their own necks, and they spread that fear over their people like the gravy on the baron's venison, until the whole room was drowning in it.

But for Loman, there was nothing strange about facing a room full of frightened people. Common folk had much to fear in this world, and whether they were wealthy and well-fed or poor and starving, people with hearts filled with fear were the people who filled up the pews of his temple every morning for the Sacrament of Sunrise, and even more so every night for Last Light's Blessing.

When he arrived, he tried to play the lord's game with Baron Hanrahan, using the lessons Bors had given him recently as best as he could to hold the man accountable for neglecting the common people and attempting to swindle the Marquis. Now, however, he realized that he'd been foolish to try using such unfamiliar tools, and the only thing that awaited him if he continued to rely on such slippery weapons was a humiliating defeat.

So he did as he had for many years before and turned away from the trivialities of the moment to focus his gaze on the distant, setting sun and the promise of the Heavenly Shores beyond. Even in the bitter cold of winter, he could still feel the warmth of the Holy Lord of Light's presence streaming through the windows of the great hall as the sun sank towards the horizon, and that moment of reflection allowed him to gather all the strength he needed to face the struggle of this moment.

"Baron Hanrahan is correct to remind everyone that until recently, I served the Holy Lord of Light in the Grand Temple of Lothian City," Loman said as he stood from his chair, turning away from the baron to address the people gathered in the room instead. "I've given much of my life to helping people meet their struggles," he said as he began to walk around the room.

Some priests clung to the authority of the pulpit, hiding behind it like a shield that would protect them from the fears and doubts that plagued even the most devout among the faithful. Others were men like Head Priest Germot, who seemed to crave the adulation and acknowledgement of the flock he guided toward the light.

But the pulpit wasn't a source of light, no matter how often you placed it in front of a window. And no matter how often you stood there, between the people and the sun, no one could ever be swayed by your own light if you constantly borrowed the glory of the Holy Lord of Light to make it seem as if you shone brightly.

Loman knew this well, and so he left the high table behind, along with the light of the setting sun beyond the windows, so that he could walk among the people instead.

"I've fed the hungry," Loman said as he walked by a grain merchant and a prominent baker he'd overheard discussing the state of their storehouses after the storm. "I know what it takes to open up your storehouses in years that are lean and to prepare food with your own hands for people too maimed by the demons in the last war to care for themselves," he said as he rested his hands on the men's shoulders.

"I learned to have a great deal of respect for bakers who use the blessings of flame and warmth to transform even something as simple as cold water and plain flour into warm bread that nourishes the body and the soul," he said as he smiled at the muscular baker who clearly worked hard to earn his place in such an esteemed gathering.

"But bakers do even more than producing loaf after loaf to feed the hungry," Loman added as he watched beads of sweat begin to form on the burly man's brow. "So many people lack a proper hearth and oven to cook their meals in, but bakers share the warmth of their ovens with others, just as the Holy Lord of Light shares the warmth of the sun's rays with all of his chosen children. Tell me, good man, has it been hard to bake your own bread with so many of your neighbors in need of your help during this storm?"

"It, it hasn't been that h-hard, yer lordship," the baker stammered, forgetting himself enough to slip back to the rougher tongue of his youth. "We've managed ta' strike a balance that keeps us all busy an' fed," he said.

Of course, the balance he'd found was a threefold increase in the fees he collected for commoners to place a loaf or a pie in one of his ovens. Usually, he only took a single snip for a loaf and two for a pie that needed minding. But with the sudden storm catching so many people short of firewood, his business was booming, and even if he'd charged a whole silver penny to bake a meat pie and a loaf of bread, there were people in the town who could afford to pay it, so why wouldn't he raise his prices?

And even if someone couldn't afford to rent his ovens, that didn't mean they couldn't buy his bread. He'd already switched out from full loaves to hand rolls, so he had something to sell to the people who were too poor to pay his inflated prices. They were still able to eat, the portions were just a bit more meager.

"Keeping everyone busy and fed," Loman said with a wide smile as he deliberately misquoted the baker. "Baron Hanrahan is lucky to have such a generous man leading the bakers of the city if you are working to keep everyone busy and fed through this winter disaster," Loman praised loudly. "I'll be sure that the Temple Guard hears of your generosity when they gather to hold funerals tonight, that way they can guide those in need to your bakeries to bask in the warmth of your ovens and receive your generosity in person," he said as he gave the man a solid pat on the back.

As he walked away from the baker and the grain merchant, the two men exchanged wide-eyed, incredulous looks. Even though the grain merchant hadn't been the target of Loman's words, he understood quite well that if the baker was expected to give loaves away for free, he'd be expected to provide the flour for it without receiving as much as two snips to rub together.

Didn't this young lord say that he was a holy man? Wasn't he supposed to be a priest? So why was it that they felt like they'd been fleeced by a money lender calling in a lifetime of shady loans all at once?

Chapter 908: Loman's Sermon (Part Two)

While the baker and the grain merchant reeled from the pressure of Loman's blatant extortion, backed by the threat of violence from the Temple Guard no less, the young lord himself had already moved on to another table as he continued to speak to Baron Hanrahan's guests as if they were members of his congregation.

"I've worked side by side with the Sisters of Soothing Light," Loman said as he arrived at a table filled with women who had been gossiping earlier. "Together we've nursed the sick, the lame, and the mad. We've cared for the children left behind by the men who fought bravely and died in our struggle against the plague of demons that infest our lands," he said, leaving them with words that sent shivers down

their spine as they tried to imagine themselves surrounded by diseased and deranged beggars, or tending to frightened and filthy orphans.

Just the thought of it was enough to turn their stomachs, and yet, when they looked at Loman's handsome features and proud bearing, they realized that even walking among such vile retches could do nothing to dim the light that seemed to radiate from him as he walked through the hall.

"Madame Cossot, was it?" Loman said gently, addressing the young woman who had recently been boasting about sharing a few words with him at Lady Ashlynn's wedding. "None of the Sisters were able to accompany us on the rough journey through the winter storm and I shudder to think about what would have happened to such kind and delicate women if they had tried," he said as he gazed at the young woman with kind, inviting eyes.

"But I know that the women of Hanrahan are stronger, more capable, and braver women who can feast and make merry even when demons roam the dark wilderness beyond the walls," he said with a gentle smile as he reached out to hold her hand delicately as if he were cradling a newly hatched bird. "So, when the time comes to care for the injured and the sick, can I count on you and your friends to stand by my side?"

"Of-of course you can, my lord," Cossot said as her face turned bright red and she stared into Loman's soft hazel eyes, getting caught up in his long, delicate lashes as the hall around her fell away and her heart began to flutter in her chest. "I'll do anything you ask," she said as she glanced down shyly before looking back up at him through her own lashes.

"I'm sure you will," Loman said as he placed the tip of his middle finger on her forehead and traced a sun and its shining rays on her brow. "Walk the path illuminated by the Holy Lord of Light, Madame Cossot, and you will find your struggles easier and your heart filled with his warmth," he said before he turned away to approach the next table.

"Cossot!" the young woman's friend Roseen hissed from beside her. "What, what did you just promise that we would do?"

"Do?" Cossot said, blinking in surprise. "Roseen, did you hear? Lord Loman, he, he remembered my name! And he asked me to spend time with him," the young woman all but squealed in delight, barely able to contain the joy in her heart.

All around her, the young women looked on in horror as they realized just how badly smitten their friend was... and that they were doomed to suffer alongside her because of it!

"I have seen people at their very worst," he added as he moved to a table where master brewers and vintners rubbed elbows with their wealthiest clients who accepted only the finest alcohol to entertain their guests.

"I've gazed into the eyes of men so lost in drink that they've forgotten their own names because it's the only way they can forget the pain of what they've lost and the horrors of what they've seen when the demons raided their farms," Loman said as he placed a hand on both of the men at the table who made their fortunes selling bottles of strong spirits to men who were desperate for an escape from the torment of their own lives.

Both men seemed to wither under Loman's touch, shrinking back from him as if their mothers had walked in on them doing something naughty with a scullery maid as their faces grew hot with shame. He hadn't said a word to condemn them, but he didn't have to... not when his words painted such a clear picture of broken men clutching at bottles as though they contained a last, faint hope of salvation.

After all... they'd both looked into the kinds of eyes Loman had described dozens of times, and they'd taken coin from those men's dirt-encrusted hands, even if they were the last snips the broken men had left to their names.

One of the men opened his mouth in a desperate desire to defend himself, but when he tried to think of what he should say, no words appeared, leaving him gaping, opening and closing his mouth like a fish out of water as he struggled to think of anything he could tell the radiant priest that would ease the sudden pangs in his heart. Loman, however, only shook his head, wanting nothing from these men beyond the cautionary tale of suffering that was all too easily exploited.

"So I know what it is that you're afraid of, Baron Hanrahan," Loman said as he turned back to the high table, addressing the lord seated there from the far back of the hall, as if he was no longer one of them but instead stood apart from the things the baron feared. "You're afraid that I've only brought a single Inquisitor with me, with just five Templars and twenty from the temple guard. You don't think that fifty Lothian soldiers are enough to make up the numbers in a fight against a demon force that can raid across the frontier with impunity."

"You're worried that I'm going to strip Hanrahan Town of its defenders in order to hunt the demons infesting your lands," Loman said, looking the red-faced and scowling baron directly in the eyes.

"You don't need to worry, Baron Hanrahan," Loman said with a polite smile and a mild tone. "Your town is large, and you have not only your walls to man but your outposts as well. The three hundred men who follow your banner are all needed to do the work of keeping the common people safe in their homes," he said as he swept his arms out wide to encompass all of the people gathered in the great hall, even though he was mostly speaking about the common folk who were far too poor to attend such a lavish gathering.

"The only men I intend to take away from here are the brave knights who are visiting from their villages and the soldiers they've brought with them," Loman said as he turned his gaze to Sir Dollin, Sir Niall, and Sir Thorryn.

"Since they're so concerned about the safety of their villages," Loman said calmly to the room that had been stunned into silence. "I'm sure they won't refuse a summons from the house of the Marquis to defend the march against demons, will they?"

Chapter 909: Silencing A Bell (Part One)

While Baron Hanrahan seethed in anger at the way Loman had turned everything on its head, he was at least warm and well fed, which was more than the men standing guard in the watch towers could say.

Everyone was nervous about demons, and the sudden winter storm had only made matters worse. Now, at a time when the Hanrahan soldiers should be drawing lots to figure out which unfortunate bastard would have to spend a night in the cold watch tower, their captains had ordered whole squads to venture out into the cold, standing watch over the dark, silent forests that overlooked the brightly lit town at the bottom of the valley.

"All right, ye sodding idiots," a shivering sergeant grouched as he descended the spiral stairs from the top of the bell tower, slamming the wooden door shut behind himself before the warm air inside the tower could escape into the cold outside.

"Who's tha' next loser ta' head out into tha' cold?" Sergeant Garth said as he looked around the collection of soldiers huddling around the small hearth in the tower, tossing dice from a cup and holding steaming bowls in their hands. "And what is that smell?" the puzzled man asked as his nose caught a hint of something meaty in the air along with a faint herbal scent.

"Come 'ere an' sit," one of the soldiers said as he scooted sideways, making room for the leader of their six-man squad and thumping the straw mat on the stone floor to invite Garth to join his men by the fire. "Saith got lucky an' hit a rabbit with his sling an hour gone by or more," he said with a toothy grin directed at the youngest member of their squad. "He even fixed up a small stew for us."

"Saved some fer ye, Garth," the young soldier said as he dragged a small iron pot away from the fire where he'd been keeping it warm. "It's not as good as the stew my da' used to make, even when tha cellar was bare an' there weren't nottin' but the rabbits 'e trapped an' tha herbs 'e dug, but it's better'n the dried meat an' beans they sent us out 'ere wit."

He said it lightly, but there wasn't anyone in the small squad who didn't know that Saith had only become a soldier because his father had been jailed for poaching, and the young lad had taken over supporting his mother and two younger sisters. He was young, but he was a good kid, and the entire squad had taken him under their collective wings as the worst collection of wise elder brothers and dastardly uncles a man could ever wish for.

"Yer not supposed ta go wanderin', idiot!" Garth snapped even as he reached out for the iron pot and started fishing in his rucksack for a small wooden spoon. "What're we s'posed ta do if ya get yerself killed out away from tha' tower? One man goes missin' then tha' next one goes lookin' fer him, only ta go missin' tha same stupid way. Next thing ye know, we're ringing tha' bloody bell on account of ye an' yer idiot mate trippin' in tha' snow an' breaking yer own foot on a tree root."

"Hey now, tha's not fair, Garth," the man holding the cup of dice protested. "We might be dumb enough ta sign up fer this sort of work, but we aren't utter fools!"

"Fool enough to dice away half yer pay the first hour we was 'ere," another man said with a laugh. "Yer new missus won't like that, will she?"

"Oh, shut it, ye don't know what it's like marrying a pious lass like me Lili," the man with the dice groused. "Her father's been tithing one snip in ten that 'e earns, an' an extra penny every holy day fer as long as she remembers. Now, she expects me ta do tha' same, jus' because I'm tha' man of tha' house' now."

The entire squad burst into deep, belly-shaking laughter at their companion's misfortune, with several of them offering 'tips' on how to convince his new wife that there were better uses for a few extra coins than giving them to the Church each month.

"Why'd ye even marry such a pious woman if ye don't care for tha' Church?" Garth asked, genuinely curious how his soldier had gotten himself into such a state. He should have been pressing for one of the men to take their turn atop the tower, but the sun would be setting soon and then it would be getting even colder and harder to see anything moving in the dark of the night.

It hardly seemed worth it to stand watch all through the night, especially when they hadn't spotted as much as a feral hog in their entire march out to the watch tower at sunrise. Nothing was moving in the unnatural cold, and there were no tracks in the deep snow for leagues in any direction, so rather than press for someone to take up the next watch, he pressed for gossip from the newlywed man.

"Look, ye can all say what ye will, but give me a pious girl any day of the year an' I'll promise you that I'm tha' first man ta ever touch 'er," the man with the dice said as he proudly thumped his chest. "That's why..."

-CRACK-

The sound of an ax crashing into the heavy wooden door echoed through the circular stone chamber like thunder. Every man froze for a heartbeat. Dice clattered to the floor, and soup bowls dropped from suddenly weak hands, falling onto the straw mats as terror seized them.

Hearts hammering loud enough to be heard over the sounds of an ax striking the door, the Hanrahan soldiers scrambled toward their weapons stacked against the curved walls, cold-numbered fingers slipping on leather straps as they fumbled with helms and shield grips. In the confined space, shoulders collided and elbows jabbed as six men tried to arm themselves as quickly as they could.

-CRACK- -CRACK- -CRUNCH-

It only took a few blows from a wicked, half-moon-shaped ax to tear a hole in the heavy wooden door, revealing the dark, beady eyes and wicked, gleaming tusks of a demon that resembled a wild boar wearing a kettle-shaped helm.

"Demons!" Garth shouted, even though it was the most obvious thing in the world, his mind struggled to come up with a more useful order as the ax thudded into the door again and again, widening the hole as the boar demon searched for the wooden bar that held the door shut.

For years, he'd spent every year drilling his soldiers, telling them that the cat demons would attack in the night and reminding them that while the demons were stealthy, they were also skittish and weak, only attacking when their own ill fortune left them half mad from hunger and made them desperate enough to attack humans. When he said it, he'd spoken from experience, and he boasted of killing two demons himself in his second year as a soldier.

Now, however, as he looked through the hole in the door at the snub-nosed demon with tusks that looked like sharpened tent spikes and eyes that burned with predatory malice, his mind ground to a halt as icy cold claws of fear gripped his heart.

These weren't the weak, feeble demons he knew... these were unholy terrors of the night made flesh and wrapped in steel... and Garth had no idea what he should do now that they had arrived at his door!

Chapter 910: Silencing A Bell (Part Two)

The demon's hot breath flowed through the hole in the door like an evil white cloud carried by the bitter cold air pouring into the stone tower through the ever widening hole in the door and with each snarl and grunt, the demon's ax cleaved away even more of the suddenly fragile wooden barrier that was all that stood between Sergeant Garth's men and certain death.

-PFEEEEEEE- -PANG!-

The sound of Saith's sling whistling in the air before a small stone panged off the demon's helm shocked Garth out of the fog of fear that clouded his mind as he began shouting orders at last.

"Slings are useless 'gainst armor," Garth bellowed. "Saith, go ring tha' bell! Everyone else, grab shields an' form up on me! Hold 'em back till Saith rings tha' bell!"

For the first time in all his years as a soldier, Garth cursed Baron Hanrahan for being a cheap bastard. For years, he'd been willing to boast to other soldiers that he only needed to carry his war hammer on the march and that it was a useful tool besides being a weapon, unlike the the unwieldy long-spears that most soldiers were required to carry in addition to their close range weapons.

Now, however, he would have traded a lifetime of stiff shoulders and aching hands for just one spear to thrust through the hole in the door before the demons forced their way inside.

Meanwhile, the youngest soldier in the tower ran toward the stairs as fast as he could, taking them two or even three at a time as he rushed to open the door at the top of the tower to the open area where the massive bronze bell hung.

-FWOOOOOOP!-

Pain exploded in Saith's right eye and half his world went dark before the pain grew so intense that he toppled backward, falling more than thirty feet through the air before crashing onto the stone floor below with the shaft and fletching of an arrow protruding from his eye. The impact alone was enough to shatter bones and his helmet could only do so much to protect his head from such a high fall. But even if the helmet had been backed by layers of quilted armor and he'd fallen on a feather mattress, it wouldn't have changed the young man's fate by more than a few heartbeats. He'd been as good as dead as soon as he opened the door atop the tower.

"Archer's got tha' bell covered!" one man shouted, his voice cracking with terror as he stared at the black fletchings protruding from Saith's ruined eye socket. His hands shook uncontrollably, and the war hammer in his grip rattled against his shield rim as the reality of their situation crashed over him like ice water.

"We're dead men anyway," Garth bellowed, grabbing the trembling soldier by his gambeson and physically hurling him toward the narrow spiral stairs. "Crawl on yer belly if ye must, but get up there an' ring that bloody bell! We'll buy ye what time we can!"

It sounded like the right thing to say, and perhaps if they were facing an assault from anyone else, it would have been, but these demons were brutal in their efficiency and the door that should have held off anything short of a battering ram for several minutes gave way in less than one, as its broken pieces fell from the hinges and clattered off the floor, revealing more than a dozen heavily armored boar demons, each one carrying a wicked ax and a shield covered with spikes.

"I'tt'ärkwa'p'al!" the leading demon shouted in their strange, clipped language as they charged into the confined space of the tower.

"Come an' die then!" Garth roared back, his war hammer raised high as he charged across the scattered bedrolls and overturned bowls. The confined space should have favored the defenders as there was barely room for two men to fight side by side between the central hearth and the curved stone walls, but that same confined space forced the soldiers to fight on a floor littered with everything from dropped dice to scattered soup bowls with their feet getting tangled in their own blankets.

It was a horrible place to make a last stand but Garth had no choice but to meet the demons head-on, boots splashing through spilled soup and knocking scattered dice aside as he tried to buy precious seconds for someone, anyone, to reach that bell.

His shield rush was a classic move, one that should have given Garth the ability to press the demons backward, pinning them in the doorway and buying his soldiers at least a few moments for someone to climb the stairs and ring the bell while he locked the demons into close combat where short range eliminated many of their advantages of greater strength, but these demons fought in ways that Garth had never even dreamed of.

The spikes on the demon's shield weren't just intimidating decorations. When Garth's wooden shield crashed against it, the iron points bit deep into the layered wood and leather, punching through like nails into timber.

The boar-demon wrenched its shield sideways with inhuman strength, using the embedded spikes as hooks to twist Garth's shield arm out of line and dragging his body painfully along with it. His feet slipped on the blood-slick stones as his shield arm was twisted at an agonizing angle, shoulder joints popping as tendons strained beyond their limits.

The pain that consumed Garth's entire left side like a searing hot brand lasted only for a moment, however, before the blade of the demon's ax fell cleanly into the gap between the bottom of his helm and the collar of his padded gambeson, biting into his neck and releasing a spray of hot blood that splashed across the walls of the tower as his body crumpled to the floor.

The last thing Sergeant Garth ever saw before the light of the world left his eyes was a horde of armored demons, wielding axes like lumberjacks and felling his men as easily as a woodsman felled trees. New recruit or old soldier, newlywed and lifelong bachelor, their blood mingled in a pool on the stone floor of the tower, binding the squad together in death as they had been in life... and no matter how they struggled, not a single one of them managed to ring the bell.