

The Vampire 921

Chapter 921: Interrupted Dinner

In Baron Hanrahan's great hall, a semblance of normalcy had returned to the welcoming feast following Loman's explosive sermon. The young lord had made some things clear, and they were nonnegotiable mandates handed down from his father, the Marquis.

No matter how much Baron Hanrahan tried to plead that Sir Dollin had grown old enough to have earned his retirement from the field of battle, or that Sir Niall was too young to lead his village's men into battle, Loman held firm. Both knights, along with Sir Thorryn, were required to bring the men under their command with them when he left to hunt the demons.

Adding their soldiers and a few of their servants would place an additional seventy men under Loman's command, bringing the total close to one hundred and fifty men, organized around the core of the Temple Guard and the Templars from the Church who were expected to lead the heavy fighting while the remainder functioned more as scouts, sentries, and the mobile wings of the small army when the time came to envelop any demon forces they encountered.

"... but I do not see why you feel the need to base your hunt out of Raek Village," Baron Hanrahan insisted, falling back to other, softer points of contention once it was clear that he would not be able to retain his knights to protect Hanrahan Town from the threat of demon raids. There were, after all, still other ways to make sure that his vassals remained close at hand.

"Hanrahan Town is much better prepared to support your mission with both supplies and accommodations," the portly baron suggested. "You can even use the web of watch towers built during my father's reign as safe camps that extend the reach of your search. As soon as your men see a sign of a demon camp, they only need to rush back to the nearest tower to pass the word all the way back to you, here in the keep. You can keep your core forces concentrated, well fed and well rested, and let the scouts do their work in the wilderness while you await their reports."

In truth, Baron Hanrahan wasn't even certain that the demons were still out there to threaten his lands. There had been no sightings of the strangely powerful 'demon knights' after the attack on Sir Carwyn's men, nor any additional reports of ambushes by flat tailed demons or anything of the sort, but if the demons were still out there, he wanted the additional security offered by keeping Loman, Inquisitor Diarmuid, and Templar Tommin close.

After all, Marquis Bors wouldn't risk any harm befalling his golden child if he truly had chosen Loman as his heir. So long as he could keep Loman here, safely inside Hanrahan Keep or at least within the town's walls, he would also gain the protection of Loman's powerful guardians.

"It's true, we could do that. In different circumstances, it would likely be the wisest course of action," Loman acknowledged, yielding some ground to Ian Hanrahan in an effort to smooth things over between them. "But in this case, we have every reason to believe that the demons have settled in the wilderness to the north and west of your barony."

"Over the summer, Lord Loman and Lord Liam Dunn drove the demons from many of their villages in the north, near Dunn Barony, while Lord Owain and Sir Tommin's assault on the demons west of the Summer Villa cleared out lands to the south of the Vale of Mists," Inquisitor Diarmuid pointed out, nodding at both Loman and Sir Tommin in turn.

"We know from High Inquisitor Ignatious's journals during the Brother's War that many of the Undying Demons came from the lands beyond the mountains," he explained, focusing on the knights gathered at the high table. "And that there is a pass to those lands beyond the Vale of Mists. Whatever may have happened in those lands, we think that the Demon Lady of the Vale has allowed the demons from across the mountains to pass through her domain, but she isn't allowing them to settle in her territory."

It was a topic that Diarmuid, Tommin, and Loman had debated at length while they were stuck in their tents, waiting out the fierce winter storm. Loman had spent more time studying the Sealed Archives than even Inquisitor Diarmuid, and he was well aware that the most powerful demon lords, the ones the demons referred to as 'High Lords' or 'Great Lords' ruled over powerful coalitions of many different demon tribes.

From Loman's perspective, the risk that the demons attacking Dunn Barony were allied with the demons attacking Hanrahan Barony was high. Diarmuid, however, reminded the young lord that only the most powerful demons could forge such a coalition, and to date, the Demon Lady of the Vale had never demonstrated that she was strong enough to bring together anything beyond the remnants of the horned demons and claw demons who had survived Cellach Lothian's assault on the Vale.

There had been a moment, during the War of Undying Demons, when it appeared she might possess that strength. But as the Church eradicated those 'Undying' demons, they were never replaced, suggesting that the Demon Lady of the Vale was unable to recruit or make more of them.

It was the raids for supplies that finally tipped the argument in Diarmuid's favor. If the new demons from beyond the mountain were the allies of the Demon Lady of the Vale, they would have no need to raid for supplies. The forests of the Vale were lush and filled with game, and there were plenty of fish at the headwaters of the River Luath, even in winter.

Another hundred, two hundred, or even three hundred demons wouldn't stretch her supplies so thinly that she would need to raid human farms for foodstuffs. But without her support, they needed to establish a camp or village to live in and had turned to raiding for the supplies they needed to survive the winter.

"Isn't that supposed to be the greatest weakness of demons?" Bastian Hanrahan interjected as he tried to find a way to insert himself in the conversation to curry favor with Loman without infuriating his own father. "Each demon lord stands alone, but we have the might of an entire kingdom to bind us together, and the Church to give our people a common purpose."

"If the Demon Lady of the Vale was smart," Bastian said, speaking loudly and confidently enough for the whole table to hear. "She'd welcome these new demons into her ranks. Then we might really have something to worry about. But primitive tribalism will keep them at each other's throats."

"Don't mistake primitive for weak," Loman cautioned. "My family has fought the forces of the Vale of Mists, the Horse Lords, and the Cat Lords for generations, and we've learned firsthand that..."

-GOOOOOOONNNNNNGGGG-

The pure, shining tone of one of Hanrahan Barony's warning bells cut through the hall like the blade of a falling ax. Wine goblets froze halfway to people's lips, and conversations died mid-word as a sudden hush swept over the hall. Here and there, chairs scraped against stone as every person turned toward the western windows, craning their necks and half standing from their seats as if they could see something through the thick, distorted glass of the narrow windows.

Baron Hanrahan's knuckles went white as he gripped the edge of the table, while Sir Tommin's hand dropped to his sword hilt before he'd even realized he was moving, a gesture echoed by the older knights sitting at the table.

Collectively, everyone in the great hall seemed to hold their breath, muscles tense as they strained to hear the second toll that would confirm their worst fears...

But a second gong never came. Instead, the bright, clarion call of the bell was followed by a deep, rumbling blast from what must have been dozens of unholy trumpets.

-HAAAAAARRRRUUUUUUMMMM-

"What, what was that?" Baron Hanrahan asked, looking at the men from the Church with wide, panicked eyes. But before anyone could answer, another sound began to echo across the whole of the valley, bringing with it an entirely different terror.

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

"Look!" Sir Naill Hane shouted, displaying none of the dignity of a knight as he pushed a chair up against the wall to get a better look out of the windows. "There's something glowing coming out of the forest! It looks like, like a serpent, made of fire," he said more loudly than he should have, setting off a wave of panicked shouts and cries throughout the hall.

"And, and it's coming this way..."

Chapter 922: Orders? (Part One)

"A serpent made of fire?" Baron Hanrahan said, momentarily shaken to the core as he wondered if the trumpet blast had come from the singular, impossibly long throat of a serpent so large that it could be seen from the castle. Eventually, however, his mind caught up with him, and he snorted disdainfully both at the young knight for saying something so ludicrous and himself for believing it in his moment of panic.

"Preposterous," Ian snorted. "There are no beasts that large, and there haven't been since ancient times. You," he said sharply, rounding on a nearby page and pointing a thick finger at the startled boy. "Run to my study and fetch my perspective glass! And someone, open up a window. I want to see this 'Fire Serpent' for myself."

"My lord," Sir Dollin said, looking at the baron with haunted eyes that struggled to keep from getting lost in a sea of memories conjured by the sounds echoing across the valley. "I know those drums. The cat demons grow twice as strong when their demon drummers play..."

The hardest, hottest fighting of the War of Inches had always been accompanied by the sound of those terrible drums. It was like the sound of it drove the demons mad, turning them into red-eyed fiends that didn't feel pain, didn't know fear, and didn't hesitate to trade their lives for the chance to pull down just one more human soldier or knight.

In one pitched battle, the fighting had grown so fierce that Marquis Bors ordered Baron Leufroy to take five knights and fifteen men on horses to circle around and assault the demon's drummers, and the tide of battle hadn't turned until the last drum had been smashed to kindling. If the demons had brought out their drums...

"We were wrong," Inquisitor Diarmuid said in a tone that was disturbingly grim. "Or we were right that the foreign demons didn't join the Demon Lady of the Vale, but that didn't mean they couldn't find shelter with one of the other demon lords..."

Everyone in the hall was processing the news their own way. At one table, the women who had been gossiping earlier had huddled together, whispering fiercely to each other.

"We should run now," Roseen said as her eyes darted from the western windows to the entrance of the great hall. "If we go now, we can be the first ones into the cellars to hide. That way..."

"Don't be silly, Roseen," the besotted Cossot said. "Lord Loman will protect us from the demons, you just have to have faith in him. Remember what he said earlier?" she asked, turning to look at her friend at the table with eyes that sparkled with dreams and hopes. "He may need us to help him if there are wounded to care for," she said as she turned her eyes back to Loman's handsome figure at the front of the great hall.

"Cossot, are you mad?" Roseen hissed, staring at the young woman who seemed more interested in chasing after the shining young lord than saving her own life. "You heard the bell! Demons are coming!"

"Oh, hush," Cossot said, waving a hand at her flustered friend. "No demons have ever scaled the walls of Hanrahan town, even without Lord Loman to protect us. We'll be fine. But if we run now, then he'll never look our way again..."

Meanwhile, near the high table, Head Priest Germot had walked over to one of the hall's narrow, glass-filled windows, gazing out at the ruddy glow at the edge of the valley as he muttered prayers under his breath.

"Lord of Light, most holy source of life in the heavens," he said softly as he clasped his hands together. "Giver of this life and guide to the next, please hear my prayers. In this life, I have been an imperfect servant of your will and I have failed in the struggle against temptations, but I have always strived to make amends for my failings..."

Not far from him, Loman shook his head slightly as he turned away from the priest, who seemed to feel that his death was so close at hand that he needed to plead with the Holy Lord of Light to forgive his failings in this life before it ended. The sound of the demon's drumming might be terrifying, but it was hardly a reason to give up hope, and there was still much they could do. The struggle to survive and defeat the demons hadn't even begun yet, and Loman wasn't about to give up now and join the aging Head Priest in praying for a merciful end.

"Forgive me, Father," Loman said softly as he made up his mind to face the demons. "I know this isn't how you wanted me to face this challenge, but I can't do this your way," he admitted to himself as he turned to one of the pages and gave orders for the man to fetch an item from his luggage.

Other pages were also rushing about the hall, leaving the platters that had carried pitchers of wine and ale reserved for the high table in a discarded, dripping heap on the floor as they carried out the orders of Sir Dollin and the other knights to fetch their armor and weapons as they began stripping off their elaborately embroidered tunics and prepared themselves for the battle that was sure to come.

"Take it one step at a time, lad," Sir Dollin told the young Sir Niall. "It's fine if there are butterflies in your gut and your knees feel a bit weak. You can empty your stomach in a bucket before the battle if you have to, better to do it now than once the fighting starts."

"Sir Dollin's right," Sir Thorryn chimed in. "The minutes before battle are the worst. Once the fighting begins, you won't have enough time to be afraid, but I nearly pissed myself with nerves the first time I had to ride out to face a raid. Every man's first time comes for him eventually," he added as he clapped a hand on the young knight's shoulder.

"Just remember what you're fighting for," he added in a much quieter voice as he nodded in the direction of his own young daughter, who clutched the hand of the young woman that Niall was courting. "We both have something to come back to, don't we? So stay at my side and we'll help each other make it through..."

"Th-thank you, Sir Thorryn," the young man said, swallowing heavily as his complexion faded from slightly green to simply pale. "I, I won't let you down," he promised.

Beside him, Sir Dollin turned to face Bastian Hanrahan, wondering if the young lord might need similar words of encouragement as they prepared to face whatever horror the demons had unleashed. Surprisingly, however, once Sir Dollin and the knights had given orders to have their weapons and armor brought to the great hall, Bastian had begun issuing orders of his own.

"Take down Dawn's Edge from the walls," Bastian said, pointing to an ax hanging on the wall with an extra-long shaft that had been carved from one of the demon's sacred trees before it was presented to Baron Brighton Hanrahan by Bors Lothian's father. "My father will want to meet the demons in battle with our most glorious weapon," Bastian insisted, even though Ian Hanrahan had never once taken the heavy weapon to battle during the War of Inches.

"And fetch our best banners with soldiers to carry them," Bastian continued. "We will not hide from the demons when we fight them!"

Seeing the young man's enthusiasm, Sir Dollin wasn't sure whether he should admire the young lord for his courage and faith in the face of the demons, or pity him for his naive impression of his father and what would happen in the battle to come.

For a moment, he considered suggesting that Baron Hanrahan wouldn't need his weapons or armor to direct the battle from the keep and that Bastian should take up the storied weapon to represent his family on the field, but when he opened his mouth to speak, he couldn't find the will to say the words.

If Baron Hanrahan wanted to take this moment to cover himself in glory on a field of battle where he would be protected by Templars and the Inquisition, it would only embarrass him if one of his knights suggested that he do otherwise, and Sir Dollin wasn't willing to risk the consequences of upsetting Lord Ian at such a delicate moment.

Moments later, a page returned with a long wooden tube held reverently in his hands, as if he was afraid of dropping something so precious. One end of the tube was wider than the other, and both ends were fitted with polished brass caps that held smooth pieces of glass.

The perspective glass was one of the most expensive treasures Baron Hanrahan owned, but he had never once begrudged the cost of the powerful tool that let him see across the entire valley without leaving his fortified keep.

As soon as the baron lifted the perspective glass to his eye, looking out through a recently opened window that let in a draft of frigid air, the hall went quiet again as they waited for the baron's news...

Chapter 923: Orders? (Part Two)

With the eyes of the entire great hall seeming to have gathered on Ian Hanrahan's shoulders, the portly baron carefully adjusted his perspective glass, panning it over the city and beyond the walls, carefully following the chain of landmarks between the walls and the wilderness so he didn't get lost in the endless fields of white while he brought the 'fire serpent' into focus.

When he finally spotted it, however, his entire body froze as if it had been encased in the very same ice that covered the minor streams that flowed into the valley to fill the great lake. For three heartbeats and then three more, he couldn't even speak as he slowly moved his vision from one horror to the next before a single word finally tumbled from his lips.

"Impossible," Ian Hanrahan muttered as he gazed upon the 'fire serpent' and saw its true form. It wasn't possible to make out many details at this distance, but it was clear that there were more than just dozens of demons marching across the snow-covered valley, there were hundreds of them, carrying torches and marching with discipline that could rival any army the Kingdom of Gaal or the Church had ever fielded. And at the head of that army...

"It's the Crimson Knight," the portly baron said, lowering the perspective glass and clutching it to his chest as if he were afraid of dropping it from hands that shook uncontrollably. "It's the Crimson Knight and an army of demons..."

It wasn't just an army, but Ian had no idea how he was supposed to describe the impossible things he'd seen through the eyepiece of his perspective glass. Giants? Wolves on two feet? Walking boars wearing armor? No one had seen demons like these before.

He thought that he had prepared himself for the sight of new terrors from beyond the mountains, and perhaps he had. But nothing could prepare him for the sight of the banners he had seen unfurled at the head of that army, and the implications of those banners chilled him to the bone.

"My lord," Sir Thorryn said, giving his young daughter a last reassuring squeeze before he stepped forward and knelt formally at Baron Hanrahan's feet. "What are your orders?"

"Orders?" Ian said as he blinked several times in confusion while his mind struggled to process what he had seen. What orders was he supposed to give? The Crimson Knight could cleave an armored man in half with his giant ax! How was he supposed to fight something like that? And giants? What were they supposed to do to slay a monster of such size! If he sent out his soldiers, he might as well place their heads on the executioner's block himself!

"Ring the alarm bells," Loman said smoothly as he stepped forward. His fingers were already working at the laces of the elaborately embroidered tunic, stripping away the decorative garment before moving on to the simpler, linen shirt underneath as he continued to give orders.

In this moment of crisis, Loman had finally realized a truth he had been hiding from ever since he made the decision to contest for the throne that should have belonged to his brother. He thought that he could step into the gap that would be left behind when Owain was stripped of his position as heir to the Lothian throne.

He thought that he could leave the Church to rule his people as the next Marquis, but he'd only been lying to himself about who he really was and what he was meant to be.

"Send archers to the walls," Loman continued in a loud, confident voice. "Make sure the fires are lit on the walls to give them light to see, and have someone bring them as many bushels of arrows as you have. I'll visit them if I have time, but they may have to make do with their own strength tonight," he said as he pulled off his undershirt to reveal a lithe, toned physique that surprised many who considered him to be nothing more than a scholarly priest.

Further back in the hall, Cossot and her companions gasped along with many other women both young and old at the sight of the handsome young lord, stripped to the waist and shining in the warm, golden light of the great hall as if he was a herald of the Holy Lord of Light himself, returned from the Heavenly Shores to guide his people through the crisis.

"My lord?" a confused young page asked, turning between Baron Hanrahan and Lord Loman Lothian as he tried to understand whether or not the young lord was allowed to give the order he just had.

"Do as he says," Sir Tommin said when Baron Hanrahan seemed incapable of issuing even a simple order. "The son of your Marquis has given an order, and it's the right one," he told the young boy who couldn't be more than a year or two older than his own son. "Stop gawking and get running, lad!"

"Lord Loman," Sir Tommin added as he turned to face the shirtless lord who had just received a large, black leather case from his luggage, emblazoned with the sun and stars crest of the Church of the Holy Lord of Light. Since the young lord had made it clear that he would step up where Baron Hanrahan was clearly failing, Sir Tommin intended to do everything he could to prop up the legitimacy of his commands.

"What other orders do you have?" Tommin asked as he knelt formally at the shirtless young lord's feet.

"Send criers through the streets," Loman said as he opened the case that had sat undisturbed and collecting dust in his chambers in Lothian Manor ever since his return from the Holy City nearly two years ago, running his fingers over the soft, elegant fabric within that felt so light in the hands but so much heavier when draped across the shoulders.

"Tell the people to stay in their homes, hide in their cellars if they have them, and tell them to pray," Loman said as he lifted out a set of priestly robes unlike any that most people gathered in the great hall had ever seen. With a single smooth motion, he wrapped them around his shoulders, sliding his arms through the billowing sleeves and setting his fingers to work on the long row of subtle fasteners that ran up the left side of the garment to keep from spoiling the sacred design across the chest.

Most people in the hall didn't understand what they were seeing but for men like Sir Tommin and Head Priest Germot, however, and especially for Inquisitor Diarmuid who had spent nearly a quarter of his life in the Holy City, it was impossible to miss the significance of the black and silver robes that Loman had donned, especially when they saw the pattern of stars embroidered across his chest and along his sleeves.

"Ex-Exemplar?!" Germot said, staring at Loman in shock as he unconsciously dropped to his knees in reverence as the young lord seemed to glow with a holy, silvery radiance in his eyes that could only belong to the legendary figures who were second only to the saints themselves.

"We're saved," Germot whispered, shaken by the whiplash of hearing the name of the Crimson Knight only moments before Loman revealed himself to be one of the Holy Lord of Light's own divine emissaries. Now that they had an Exemplar on their side, surely even the Crimson Knight would fall!

Chapter 924: The Truth Behind The Rumors

Exemplar.

In the entire Church, fewer than twenty men could carry the title that belonged to the holy emissaries who were second only to the Saints who led the church. Most Exemplars resided in the old countries, and only a handful had ever set foot inside the borders of the Kingdom of Gaal outside of one of the great crusades. The ones who did come to Gaal rarely left the Holy City unless there was a great threat from the demons that could shake the foundations of the kingdom itself.

The last time an Exemplar had visited Lothian March, they had come to kill the powerful demon lord who ruled over the Vale of Mists, and their disciples had been responsible for capturing some of the greatest heretics and traitors to humankind the world had ever seen. Now that one stood among them again, the people of the hall didn't know what they should do.

Many imitated Head Priest Germot, kneeling in supplication to the sacred emissary of the Holy Lord of Light who stood in their midst. Others let out wild cheers of joy before hastily covering their mouths, as if they were afraid of doing something blasphemous.

Loman, however, only shook his head before crossing the room to the kneeling priest and helping the man to his feet.

"I'm not an Exemplar," Loman said, gesturing to his simple silver collar and the single band of silver around the edge of his sleeves before he realized that Head Priest Germot had likely never been to the Holy City and probably didn't understand the differences between the robes Loman wore and the ones that were worn by a true Exemplar. "I'm just a humble Disciple of His Holiness, Domas Onaitis," he explained.

Seven years ago, when Loman's mother died, High Priest Aubin had arranged for Loman to visit the Holy City to pursue his calling. Marquis Bors' grief was deeper than any Aubin had ever seen from a nobleman at the loss of a wife when their marriage had been born of politics rather than love, and he'd worried that Loman's kind, caring heart would be swept away in a tide of bitterness and loss that came as much from his father as it did from his own heart.

Five years later, when the younger Lothian lord returned, rumors seemed to follow wherever he went, constantly attaching his name to the word 'Exemplar.' He was given privileges at the temple in Lothian City that no ordinary priest would have, and even the title of Priest was conferred on him years before most acolytes could have dreamed of obtaining the rank. He was routinely invited to visit the temples in both Keating City and Carew City, and he spoke as though he were a peer to all but the most senior members of the Church across the frontier.

The rumors had been so persistent that, though Loman was unaware of it, they had reached the Vale of Mists, prompting Commander Bassinger to test Loman's limits during Liam Dunn's campaign, ensuring that he didn't display the powers of an Exemplar before committing to any kind of counterattack against the young lords and their forces.

"Not, not an Exemplar?" Head Priest Germot stammered as his eyes scanned over Loman's face and his body, feeling the intense aura that radiated from the young disciple despite his claim that he wasn't an emissary of the Holy Lord of Light. "But you, you..."

The Head Priest's suddenly shattered confidence, combined with Loman's admission to cleave through the atmosphere of hope and reverence like a woodcutter's ax felling a tree. Across the great hall, people who had hugged each other in relief that an Exemplar would save them from the demons now looked even more hopeless than they had when the alarm bell first rang.

"We're doomed," one of the wine sellers that Loman had chastised muttered, reaching for a jug of strong wine and taking a swig directly from the serving vessel. "We need tha Saint his self ta come save us now..."

"There's still time to run," Roseen whispered to her friend Cossot, despite the fact that the whitesmith's daughter still looked at Loman with eyes filled with stars. "He's not a real Exemplar, you don't have to worship him..."

"Oh, what do you know," Cossot said sharply as she fought to hold back tears of disappointment. For a brief moment, she thought she finally understood why Lord Loman was so special, but now, she felt like her heart had been toyed with, even though she was certain that the young Lord had never intended to hurt anyone.

Elsewhere in the great hall, people were more focused on the demons and the legends of the Crimson Knight that had grown into a sort of local folklore ever since the War of Inches.

"They say he can cleave through an armored knight and his horse in a single blow," one man whispered, shaking his head as he looked at the knights buckling on their armor. "What's the point of our knights even riding out against a demon like that?"

"I heard that his armor was dead-black when the War of Inches started, I did," another man said. "It's only red 'cause it soaks up the blood of all the men he's killed!"

"Nuttin' can stop tha' Crimson Knight," a wealthy cheese monger said hopelessly. "All a man can do is run from 'im. Run an' pray that yer friends run slower 'an ye do," the man added with a look at his dining companions around the table, as if he was trying to assess which of them he might run faster than, only to slump in greater hopelessness when he realized that there were still many younger lads and lasses that were certain to out run a man like him who had grown fat on his own wares.

"Everyone, please!" Loman cried, holding up his hands and speaking in a powerful, strident tone that resounded off the walls of the great hall. "The demons will be here soon, but we aren't defenseless against them," he said as he stepped first onto his chair at the high table, and then onto the high table itself in order to address the crowd.

For a moment, he wished that he could also gather the soldiers of Hanrahan town to hear his words. The archers who were even now rushing to the walls and the guardsmen who were belting on their gambesons and fetching their weapons needed inspiration and confidence much more than the wealthy merchants who were safely ensconced in Hanrahan Keep did.

But the great hall also held the knights of Hanrahan Barony, who would lead their men in battle, the lord who would have to command the defense of his town, and the Head Priest who controlled the most important reinforcements that Loman would need in order to unleash the powers he had gained through years of study as Exemplar Domas Onaitis's Disciple.

If there was anyone Loman truly needed to convince to stand and fight and to follow his plans, then that man was in this room. He only hoped that his words would be enough to convince everyone to follow him, even though he was nothing more than a humble disciple of the savior the people cried out for....

Chapter 925: Rallying The Defenders (Part One)

"I may not be the Emissary of the Ascended Archer," Loman admitted as a hush fell over the hall once again. "But an Exemplar's eyes see far ahead and they can read a man's fortune in the stars the way lesser men read their books of prayers," he said, heaping praise on his mentor that didn't feel the least bit exaggerated.

Loman had seen more than enough demonstrations over the years of his teacher's ability to describe events that would soon come to pass, from things small enough to change the life of a single family to great events that could spell the rise or ruin of a whole barony or even a county. Now, Loman placed his faith in his mentor's uncanny ability to see far ahead as he addressed the crowd, revealing a truth he was only coming to understand at this moment.

"My teacher, Exemplar Domas Onaitis, sent me back to the march for a reason," Loman said as he looked out over the crowd of frightened, hopeless faces. "He told me that the day would come when I would be needed here, and that my star would only rise if I could meet the struggle that awaited me at home," he recounted.

"I thought I knew what I had to do," he admitted in a self deprecating tone with a wry smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "I thought he intended for me to take my place in the march as my father's son, to use what I had learned in my years in the temples of the Holy City to guide our people as a lord should. But I was wrong," he said with a growing sense of conviction.

For months, he had been lost in a fog, wondering if his teacher had done him a kindness by saying he would be needed at home and that his greater purpose could only be fulfilled if he returned. That greater purpose had increasingly felt like it would tear him away from his faith and Loman had taken it as his personal struggle to set aside his future in the Church for one where he protected his people as their Marquis.

Now, however, when a demon threat like none the Lothian March had faced before prepared to descend on the very place that he was standing, he understood exactly why his teacher had sent him home. He was like the arrow, fired from the Ascended Archer's bow, and it was time for him to strike the target he'd long ago been aimed toward.

"It was this moment that Exemplar Domas Onaitis prepared me for!" Loman declared in a loud shout that echoed off the walls of the great hall. "It is this moment that has revealed his purpose in sending me here and I will not forsake you! I may not be an Exemplar," Loman admitted in a quieter tone. "But that doesn't mean that the Holy Lord of Light has left us powerless and defenseless against the demons. We can still fight!"

"But can we win, your worship?" Baron Hanrahan asked from the place by the window where he still stood clutching his perspective glass. He hadn't taken a single step from the spot since he revealed that the Crimson Knight marched at the head of the army and his face had taken on a deathly pale, almost sickly hue as he grappled with what he had seen. The eyes that he turned now toward Loman Lothian were dull and his voice sounded flat and hollow when he spoke.

"There is no surviving the Crimson Knight, your worship," Ian Hanrahan said, echoing the words of the common people at the feast. "There is only running. We still have time to flee if we leave now," he suggested, throwing away his pride and dignity as worthless shackles in the face of the crimson armored doom descending on them.

"No, we will not run," Loman declared, definitively rejecting the baron's self-serving cowardice. "I may not be an Exemplar but my teacher has taught me much. Maybe enough to turn the tide, but I cannot fight alone. Thankfully, I do not have to, because the Holy Lord of Light has seen fit to provide us with the strength we need to meet our struggle!"

"Sir Tommin is not just any Templar," Loman pointed out as he turned to the man who had once been his brother Owain's personal guard. "He has fought and slain more demons than any other man in this hall and he bears a Holy Light Blade that can cut through darkness itself," he said, heaping praise on the man whose faith in righteousness had been so strong that he was willing to forsake even his own family in order to pursue a path of justice after Owain murdered Lady Ashlynn on the night of their wedding.

"Tell me, Baron Hanrahan," Loman said as he turned back to the frightened lord. "In all the years that your barony has struggled with this evil knight, has the Crimson Knight ever had to face a man like Sir Tommin?"

Now that he mentioned Sir Tommin, many people in the crowd began to nod silently in agreement. After all, were it not for the fact that Sir Tommin stood in Lord Owain's shadow for much of his life, the Templar would have been just as famed for his swordsmanship and skill at arms as Sir Carwyn Belvin.

For years, he had fought the demons side by side with the man who had been called one of the greatest swordsmen of the current era and in many stories he was the only man on the field of battle who could keep up with Owain Lothian.

"No..." Ian admitted as Loman's words ignited the smallest glimmer of hope in his chest. "No, but many say that the Crimson Knight is a vampire like the Demon Lady of the Vale, a creature of darkness," he said. "If there is anything that is the bane of his existence, it should be a man like Sir Tommin and his holy sword," he realized.

"Exactly so!" Loman said with an encouraging smile. "Sir Tommin will face the Crimson Knight head on, but he will not struggle alone! One man alone, fighting a duel in the middle of the battlefield, would surely be pulled down, but Inquisitor Diarmuid has come to us from the Holy City and he fought the demons in the wilderness. His holy flames burn hotter than any other Inquisitor in the march!"

Chapter 926: Rallying The Defenders (Part Two)

Diarmuid frowned slightly at the way Loman boasted of his capabilities. Whether his flames were hotter than the flames of the local Inquisitors or not hardly mattered, but it was something that the people could understand, even if it wasn't precisely true.

Looking at the knights, however, particularly young Sir Niall, he realized just how ragged and on edge the leaders of the town's defenses were. As soon as Loman had explained that Sir Tommin could counter the terrifying Crimson Knight, Baron Hanrahan's knights had slumped in visible relief that they wouldn't be called upon to sacrifice themselves in a futile attempt to destroy the heretical knight.

Personally, Diarmuid felt that he had learned much from the local Inquisitors during his brief venture into the wilderness with Owain Lothian. These men were the true heroes standing at the edge of civilization and burning away the darkness and evil that crept in from the demon's territory, and Diarmuid disliked the dishonesty of holding himself up as a source of salvation by pushing those men down.

At the same time, much like he understood why the Church wouldn't move against Owain Lothian despite his guilt, he acknowledged that Loman needed to do whatever he could in order to rally the defenders before they abandoned the fight.

And perhaps, as an outsider who couldn't rely on a history of accomplishments in Lothian March the way Sir Tommin could, it was important to do something more... tangible to give the people a reason to place their faith in him.

"Oh Holy Lord of Light and Fire,

Reveal your might in Sacred Flame,

Show them strength that never tires,

Burning bright in your great name!"

Rather than agree with Loman's exaggerated rhetoric about the heat of his flames, Diarmuid held out his hand to offer a demonstration of real power, pouring his heart and his faith into his prayer and conjuring a pillar of flame the width of his hand that stretched almost all the way to the great hall's ceiling.

Sacred reddish-golden flames burst into being, hot enough to be felt like the warmth of the rising sun on the cheeks of people all the way at the back of the hall, and intense enough that anyone sitting at the first row of tables near the Inquisitor visibly drew back from the intensity of the heat.

Most of the people in the hall had never seen the Holy Flames of an Inquisitor, but seeing it now and feeling the heat of his flames from dozens of paces away, the icy grip of fear began to melt from the hearts of the people, even after Diarmuid waved his hand and dismissed his flames.

"The Holy Lord of Light has given us His Holy Flames to cleanse the land of evil demons," Loman said with a nod of acknowledgement to the Inquisitor, silently thanking him for his demonstration. "And he has given us the Holy Light to cut through the darkness," he added as he gestured to Sir Tommin, now dressed again in the gleaming armor of a Templar and looking larger than life in his pristine white tabard.

"And with the Holy Lord of Light as my witness, the stars themselves will guide us to victory!" Loman called, holding up a hand high above his head as he closed his eyes in silent prayer.

When he did, the light in the great hall seemed to dim as a single bright point of light blazed in his hand. The moment Loman clutched that bright point of light, it was joined by two others, one a few inches beneath his hand and another several inches above it. Soon those points of light were followed by two

more below and two more above, forming the familiar constellation of Ceslovas Beksa, the Ascended Archer.

Once the final bright star appeared, light spilled from Loman's hand in a thin line, connecting the dots of stars until he held a shining, luminous bow formed of pure, holy light.

"No one can hide from the Sacred Stars above," Loman said to the crowd who stood mesmerized, staring at a manifestation of the power of the Holy Lord of Light unlike any they had seen before. "But I cannot fight alone," he added as he turned to look at the awestruck Head Priest, who was once again gazing at the Lothian Lord with bright eyes filled with reverence.

"I need twelve arrows in my quiver," Loman said firmly as he looked into the other man's wide and shining eyes. "I need you to do this for me, and there is very little time," he said as he glanced to the window where the advancing serpent of flame was even more visible before, though it hadn't drawn close enough yet to distinguish individual points of light with the unassisted eye.

"Can you return to the temple and send me as many acolytes as you can spare?" Loman asked, though his tone was firm enough that it was clear he would only accept one answer. "It cannot be fewer than twelve, but I'm sure that Inquisitor Ignatious can use all the help you can lend him as well," he added.

A real Exemplar, like Exemplar Domas Onaitis, could channel the power of an entire heavenly choir in times of need, and he had assured Loman that one day, he would be able to command the devotion of at least fifty acolytes, even if he was never elevated by one of the saints. But for now, twelve acolytes were both the minimum number he needed in order to assemble a sacred quiver of faith, and the most that he could harness power from.

Whether or not Ignatious could draw devotion from members of the faithful who weren't part of the Inquisition, Loman didn't know, but even if they were of no use at all, there were certain to be plenty of wounded soon, and there would be no shortage of need for acolytes who could tend to them.

"I, I can return to the temple?" Germot said, blinking in surprise as he was told that he could escape to the only place in the entire town that would be safer from the demons than the keep he was currently standing in. "Of course," he said eagerly. "You'll have your arrows, your Worship, I mean, you'll have my best acolytes! Twelve of them and not a man less!"

"And more if you can spare them!" Loman called after the priest, who had started to run for the doors as soon as he'd made a brief, almost perfunctory gesture of reverence in Loman's direction.

"Lord Loman, your Worship," Ian Hanrahan said awkwardly as he shuffled toward the dark-robed figure who seemed to shine like the stars in the heavens, even after he released the holy power of the sacred bow he had displayed to everyone in the great hall.

At this point, Baron Hanrahan had to admit that he had completely lost control of anything that would happen next. In some ways, that was a relief as he could pin any failures squarely on young lord Loman's shoulders, but at the same time, he wanted to do everything he could to improve his odds of surviving this night, and that meant that he had to show Loman the truth about what he was facing.

"Your Worship, would you like to take a look?" Baron Hanrahan said awkwardly as he held out his perspective glass. "I, I think there are things you should see. Then, then you'll know what to do."

"All right," Loman said, stepping down from the table to meet the portly baron by the window. "Let me take a look," he said as he carefully took the perspective glass from the man's outstretched hands.

As he did, both Inquisitor Diarmuid and Sir Tommin came to join him at the window. For a moment, Sir Dollin looked like he was about to follow, ready to act as an advisor to the young lord who was preparing to command his first battle in war, only to stop when he saw the Inquisitor and the Templar making their moves.

This battle, the aging knight realized, would be led by the Church and not by ordinary lords and soldiers like him... and when it came to battles involving holy powers the likes of which he'd never seen before, he realized that his advice might be worse than useless.

When Loman raised the eyepiece to his eye, after a few moments of orienting himself to the view that could shift wildly with the slightest of motions, he finally located the slowly advancing demon army, but when he did, he went every bit as still as Baron Hanrahan had.

"Baron Hanrahan," Loman said softly, speaking in a hushed tone that could only be heard by the three men standing beside the window without taking his eye off the eyepiece. "How sturdy are your gates? You've glimpsed the demon giants. Do you think your gates will hold them back?"

Chapter 927: Doing What Is Necessary (Part One)

"You've glimpsed the demon giants. Do you think your gates will hold them back?"

Loman's question should have been a simple one, but there was something in his tone and the focused way that he didn't take his eyes off the enemy as he spoke that put Baron Hanrahan instantly on edge and made him hesitant about providing the bold, confident answer that he normally would have.

"I, I didn't see any rams with them," Ian Hanrahan said slowly as he mopped sweat from his brow as he thought about how many years it had been since either the timbers of the gates or the iron strapping had been replaced. Frantically, he tried to think of a number he could give Loman that wouldn't disappoint or upset the Lothian Lord.

"But the gates themselves, um, even the West Gate, it's been, er, at least," he rambled as he felt the intense pressure of Inquisitor Diarmuid's eyes landing on him, bringing with it the realization that he would never get away with even a minor fib or exaggeration before these men. Even if most of Loman's attention was on the advancing demon army, the same couldn't be said of the other men.

"It's been at least twenty years since it was last replaced," Baron Hanrahan admitted with a heavy sigh as his whole body deflated and his shoulders slumped. "There hasn't been a reason to repair or renew them since the last war. I, I was planning to replace the gates this spring in preparation for the Holy War but I... I haven't begun the work," he said at last, looking awkwardly out the window toward the 'fire serpent' advancing across the snow in order to avoid meeting the gazes of the men around him.

In truth, he'd been putting off even buying supplies as he felt like there would be opportunities to exploit with men like Guild Master Tiernan of the Iron Mongers coming to settle in the march and perhaps even becoming one of his vassals but however many sovereigns he might have saved, they wouldn't do anything to save him and Hanrahan town now.

"The gates will fail quickly then," Loman said with a sigh as he set down the perspective glass, nodding to himself as his mind rapidly assembled the few pieces of a puzzle that he had into a shape that was at the very least unsettling.

Whether it was simple neglect and more of the penny pinching miserliness he was starting to expect from Baron Hanrahan or something more sinister, it changed nothing about the problem they were facing. The defenses the town needed to rely on were poorly maintained and likely wholly inadequate to counter the threat they were about to face.

After a moment spent collecting his thoughts, his gaze swept from the portly, nervously sweating baron standing before him to his son Bastian. The young lord looked like he was trying to figure out how he could gain the most glory in the battle to come by fetching the treasured weapons of his family and ordering bonfires to be lit atop each of the towers while hanging the largest Hanrahan banners they could find from the battlements.

From the outside, he certainly looked industrious, but his actions would do absolutely nothing to shift the course of the battle to come, leaving Loman to wonder if it was incompetence from a man who should be more than old enough to know better, or something just as sinister as allowing the iron-bound wooden gates to rust and rot for decades without repair.

"Lord Bastian, Sir Dollin, please come here," Loman said with a dark expression on his face as he waved the other men over. For a moment, he wished that he could hand this problem over to Inquisitor Diarmuid, and eventually, he would likely do exactly that. For now, however, they had less than twenty minutes before the demons would arrive, assuming they didn't charge across the final distance, and he needed the Inquisitor at his side in the battle to come.

"Your Worship," Sir Dollin said, kneeling formally at Loman's feet and placing an armored hand on Bastian's shoulder to pull the young lord down with him to do the same. "What commands do you have for us?"

"Sir Dollin, how are the guest rooms that were prepared for my visit? Are they safe and secure?" Loman asked, drawing confused looks from everyone who had gathered by the windows. Even Inquisitor Diarmuid and Sir Tommin exchanged puzzled glances, wondering why the Disciple of an Exemplar would be asking about his guest chambers just minutes before the enemy would arrive at the gates.

"Of course they are, your Worship," Sir Dollin said with a frown. "Do you, do you want to use your guest chambers for the people in the great hall? They're spacious, and you can easily host five or ten visitors if you're willing to use the whole suite, but if that's what you have in mind, I would recommend selecting only the most important guests in the hall to receive the honor of the extra protection," he said, hoping the answer that he would have given if Baron Hanrahan had asked the same question would please the Lothian Lord.

"That's fine, so long as the door to the suite is sturdy and can be guarded by a single man, I only need to have two people placed in those chambers," Loman said.

"If it's only two, then it's no problem at all," the white haired knight said with a bright smile as he realized the young lord's intentions. It seemed, he thought, that even holy men weren't immune to a man's desires on the eve of battle, and there were few ways into a woman's heart that were more certain than to send her 'somewhere safe' to await the end of the battle when her hero would return covered in the blood of the slain and the sweet smell of victory.

"Who would you like me to pull aside for you, my lord?" Sir Dollin asked as he turned to survey the crowd. "There was a young woman that you spoke with earlier tonight who..."

"No," Loman said decisively. "I need you to take Baron Hanrahan and Lord Bastian into custody. Take them away from this hall at once, lock them in my chambers, and do not let them anywhere near their studies or their chambers where there may be evidence of their crimes."

Chapter 928: Doing What Is Necessary (Part Two)

"Crimes?!" Baron Hanrahan blurted, loudly enough that several of the pages who were running errands for the various knights nearby stopped in their tracks before Inquisitor Diramuid's dark, furious gaze sent them rushing back to their tasks with their heads lowered, pretending that they hadn't heard anything they shouldn't.

"Crimes," Loman said darkly. "Unless you can offer a very good explanation why there's a demon army marching toward us under the banner of the Hanrahan family? Side by side with the ax and wing of the Demon Lady of the Vale and the Paw and Stars of the Cat Lord of Airgead Mountain," he said.

There had been other banners as well, two of them displaying trees, though one seemed to belong to a human lord he didn't recognize, while the other was in the style of the demon lords. Neither of them mattered, however, when the single largest banner on the field and the one carried by a demon walking beside the Crimson Knight belonged to the very same noble family that was charged with the protection of this very town.

"I, I don't know," Baron Hanrahan said as all color drained from his face. Ever since he'd seen the banner, he'd been terrified about what it could mean. He'd very nearly held back his perspective glass instead of revealing it to the Lothian Lord, but... at most, he would only have been delaying the inevitable.

"I swear to you, your Worship," he said as he dropped to his knees and clutched at Loman's inky black robes with hands that were slick with sweat. "I don't know why that banner is there, or who it could be! My family would never side with demons, you have to believe me," he pleaded.

"I want to believe you," Loman said as he scowled at the groveling baron. "If for no other reason than that I don't believe you have the courage to conspire with demons against your own kind. But I'm sure Inquisitor Diarmuid will find the truth of it when the battle is over."

"For now," he said as he turned to the white haired knight, who looked just as pale and green at the notion of imprisoning his liege lord as young Sir Niall had at the idea of fighting the demons. "Sir Dollin, place the Baron and his son under arrest in my chambers, and stand guard at the door until you receive orders from me or a member of the Inquisition to do otherwise," he said firmly.

"But, but I didn't do anything wrong!" Bastian Hanrahan cried. "I, I swear to you, other than shorting our tithe or helping Head Priest Germot find the company of a..."

"Shut up, fool!" Ian snapped at his son as he shot to his feet, reaching out to grab hold of the top of the young lord's breast plate and shaking him before he could say another word. "We're already under arrest! Don't make it worse," he spat.

"We'll go," he said, wilting slightly as he confronted the dark gazes of both the Inquisitor and the Templar. "And when this is all over, when you find the person among the demons who has slandered my family, then I want to be there when they burn at the stake!"

"You'll have your chance to prove your innocence, my Lord Baron," Diarmuid said in a tone that was carefully neutral. "I'm not in the habit of declaring someone guilty and looking for evidence to support the accusation afterward, and neither is Lord Loman," he added. "But even I have to admit demons marching under your banner is enough to summon the Inquisition even if it happened a thousand leagues away."

"He, he's right, my lord," Sir Dollin said awkwardly, looking ten years older than he had just minutes ago as he looked to the portly baron with pleading eyes. "His Worship is only sending you to the guest wing," he added. "It's not the dungeons. When this is over, I'm sure it will all clear up and no one will be worse off for it," he suggested.

He also recognized the element of extraordinary kindness in the orders that Loman had given. Dollin knew that he was getting old, and he had no business on the field of battle with demons more than twenty years after he'd fought in the War of Inches. He'd donned his armor, and his mace hung from his hip, but his hands shook in his gauntlets, and his left knee was already trying to lock up on him as soon as the page had tightened the straps of his armor.

He was too old for this, and he knew it, but he couldn't stand down at a time when the safety of the entire town was in jeopardy. Now, he could withdraw from the battlefield and leave the command of his soldiers to the younger knights while he took up an honorable position standing guard over Baron Hanrahan.

"Are you sure that was wise?" Diarmuid asked Loman gently once the elderly knight had escorted the baron and his heir away. "Ian Hanrahan may be retiring soon, but his son will never forgive you for stealing his chance to cover himself in glory by defending his home and his people from demons."

"He can thank me after we win this battle for preserving his life," Loman said with a sharp shake of his head. "How long has it been since Lord Bastian even showed up to fight in a tournament? Long before I came home from the Holy City at the very least, and before I left, he was already a laughingstock."

There were many lords on the frontier who were also great knights. Men like Baron Aleese, who commanded the greatest cavalry force in the whole of Lothian March, or Baron Leufroy, who was said to make wagers with Marquis Bors before each battle about which man would slay more demons by the end of the day.

But there were also men like Bastian Hanrahan who had famously fallen from his own horse at a tournament, not when his opponent's lance struck him, but when the starting flag was waved and his horse reared to charge. Many thought it would have been a kindness if he'd died from his injuries, leaving Hugo Hanrahan to take over the barony.

Hugo Hanrahan might not be a brave warrior either, and he was technically a bastard, but at least he wasn't an idiot who only knew how to act like his father's lapdog.

"Whether it was wise to arrest Ian Hanrahan or not," Loman continued as he looked at the two men he would rely on the most to win the battle to come. "I couldn't take the risk that he would betray my plans to the demons. Now, listen closely," he said as he pushed thoughts of the Hanrahans firmly to the back of his mind and focused on the battle to come.

"We're going to lose the gates early in the battle," Loman said more calmly than he felt. "So this is what I need you to do..."

Chapter 929: A Clash of Lights (Part One)

Outside the walls of Hanrahan town, Dame Sybyll brought her advancing army to a halt atop a small rise just five hundred paces from the west gate of Hanrahan town.

-HAAAAAAAAARUUUUUMMMMM-

A trumpet blast from Ipiktok's Tuscans not only signalled the army's stop, but echoed across the whole of Hanrahan Town and the valley in which it sat, signalling the drummers at the edge of the wilderness to pause their steady, rhythmic march while Dame Sybyll's forces rearranged themselves for the assault.

The advance across the snow covered valley had been slow and steady, even though it gave the defenders plenty of time to get their own forces in position. While Sybyll could have rushed across the valley to take the defenders by surprise, the result would have been tired soldiers arriving winded and out of breath while their opponents were relatively fresh. Instead, she took her time on a long stroll through the gently rolling hills of the valley of her long lost home while her army marched steadily behind her.

"Hauke, unfurl yer banner o' light," Dame Sybyll commanded as she stared at the walls of her home town and the dozens of archers standing atop them.

There were fires set on the walls behind the men to allow them to see into the night and find their targets, but even with the combination of moonlight and starlight reflecting off the snow and the torches carried by Dame Sybyll's forces, it was still difficult to make out details at a distance for anyone who lacked Dame Sybyll's superior vision.

Tonight's battle would be fierce and Sybyll wasn't willing to risk any mistakes. If a man wanted to surrender or a commoner was caught out where they shouldn't be, she didn't want confusion and darkness to be a reason for unnecessary bloodshed. So, even though it would place a burden on the young Frost Walker lord to maintain his sorcery throughout the night, Sybyll didn't hesitate to ask him to push back the curtain of darkness that lay over her home town.

Nearby, Hauke raised the Runic Blade of Eternal Ice, surrounding himself and the sword's long, wide blade in a pale blue-green aura as he prepared to 'unfurl a banner of light' in the sky above Hanrahan Town. Four different runes along the length of the blade pulsed with bright, purple light and for a moment, a chill wind blew over Dame Sybyll's army before it swirled high into the sky, carrying Hauke's sorcery with it.

Several heartbeats later, while Dame Sybyll's army organized themselves into neat ranks, hurling their torches onto makeshift sleds that carried piles of tinder to become bonfires in the night, Hauke's sorcery sliced through the sky above Hanrahan Town.

At first, it was nothing more than a shimmer in the sky, barely seen by anyone, but then, like a banner unwinding from around its staff, vast curtains of shimmering blue and green light began to ripple in the sky, covering the entire valley in a pale, blue-green radiance that was almost as bright as the morning sun on a cloudy day.

The powerful display of sorcery did far more than just illuminating the town that would soon transform into a battlefield. Placed high in the sky at a height that would align with clouds had there still been any in the night sky, the shifting ribbons of light could be seen for dozens of leagues in every direction, providing a signal to the dispersed raiding parties of Commander Tausau's Third Army, freeing them to begin their assault on every village in Hanrahan Barony.

Only Raek Village at the northern edge of the barony would be spared. Everyone else in the barony, however, would soon learn where the demons had gone after their first terrifying round of raids, only this time, they were coming for far more than a few wagon loads of crops.

At the Temple of the Holy Lord of Light, Head Priest Germot stared in horror as the demonic light blossomed across the night sky.

"This is unnatural," he muttered as he stared at the sky. Colors were dull and muted, washed out by the unholy light. It wasn't the soft, golden glow of a brightly burning fire or the dull, reddish warmth of a fire burning low, nor was it the pale, silvery light of the stars in the heavens or the pure, radiant light of the sun... this light was something that didn't exist in the natural world. Something twisted and evil that perverted the Holy Lord of Light's gift and he wouldn't stand for it.

Throughout the temple, the common people muttered in fear, pressing up against each other and cowering before the evil, demonic light. The temple had already started to fill with people seeking shelter from the storm, but once the warning bell rang and the unholy drumming began, every man,

woman and child of great faith had rushed to the temple, filling the chapel, the courtyard and every available space of the temple grounds with people seeking shelter and safety.

"We're gonna' die!" a young mother shrieked, clutching her young son to her chest while the strong, powerful arms of her husband wrapped around both wife and child, as if he would use his own body to shield them from the evil light in the sky.

"It's witchcraft! Witchcraft coverin' tha' skies!" an older man shouted, pointing at the shifting ribbons of light in the sky with a gnarled, bony finger. "It's tha' end o' days!"

"Save us, o' Holy Lord. Have mercy on me!"

"I know I weren't a good man, but please, this once, donn'a let me die t'night..."

"Everyone! Everyone, listen to me!" Germot cried as the voices of the panicked faithful grew louder and louder. "Yes, the demons have come," he acknowledged as he clutched at the polished wooden staff topped by a golden sun emblem that carried a faint trace of the Holy Lord of Light's power after years of use in countless ceremonies.

"But just because the demons have come doesn't mean the Holy Lord of Light has forsaken us!" Germot said loudly. "Tonight, we will show the demons the power of our faith! We will show them that good will triumph over evil and that we will not shrink back from our struggle! Lend me your voices. Fill the air with the power of your faith. Open up your hearts to the Holy Lord of Light and sing his praises with me," he said.

He would never admit it, perhaps not even to himself, but seeing demon sorcery that could cover the entire sky with twisted, unholy light had shaken the Head Priest to his core. If the demons were this powerful than the weak prayers and wards his acolytes had set over the walls would do nothing to protect the town.

But that didn't mean that he was powerless to fight back! He might not be able to protect the whole of the town, but with enough of the faithful gathered, he should be able to bring about a minor miracle...

Chapter 930: A Clash of Lights (Part Two)

"Acolytes, join me in the Ode to Dawn," Germot commanded as he took his place in the sacred chapel, standing behind a gilded altar and stretching his arms out wide, as if he intended to embrace his entire congregation.

"We lift our hearts, we lift our hands,

We lift our voices to the Light.

Oh faithful people of this land,

We join together our hearts in Light"

The Head Priest had to repeat the first verse of the Ode to Dawn twice, singing in a deep, resonant voice that commanded attention, before the acolytes positioned around the chapel joined in the song, calling upon the faithful to offer up their prayers and devotion. Once the acolytes had joined in, he moved on to the second verse, giving their power a purpose.

"Lord of Dawn and Morning's glow,

Let Your fiery radiance flow.

As Your Sun ascends on high,

Bring forth Your Light across the sky."

When the second verse completed, Germot could already feel the stirrings of faith in the air, gathering like dew drops in the morning air, but it was far from enough for his purposes. With a shake of his arms and a beckoning gesture to the people assembled in the chapel, he launched again into the first verse of the powerful ode, and this time, more than a hundred voices joined in prayer, raising up their hands high above their heads as if they were pulling the sun up above the distant eastern hills to welcome dawn.

The faith of a single lay-person was like a single grain of barley. Some were cracked, broken, and hard even when they had been carefully nurtured their whole lives. Others were full and plump, tender and ready to return all of the energy that had been invested in cultivating them. But no single grain of barley would be enough to make a meal, and no lay person could use the power of their faith to bring about a miracle.

But as the song spread through the temple, spilling out into the courtyard where even more of the faithful knelt near the flames of vast bonfires that had begun as pyres for those fallen in the snowstorm, the song grew stronger and so too did the faith that flowed from the singers.

With hundreds of voices united in prayer, Germot's staff began to glow with a brilliant, golden aura as he began a slow procession from the front of the chapel to the courtyard outside, revealing the power of the Holy Lord of Light to all the faithful and encouraging those who weren't yet singing to add their voices, and the power of their faith, to the prayer.

Soon, he had enough power swirling around him to raise his staff high above his head, holding it from the base so the gleaming disk of the sun atop the staff could be seen by all of the faithful around him. Then, as the people continued to sing, the glow spread from the staff to envelop the gilded dome atop the chapel, spreading the soft, rosy glow of dawn's radiance across the entire temple grounds.

Still, it wasn't enough, but Germot was patient, leading the singers in the courtyard in another round of the simple, powerful prayer as their voices called out to the entire town, entreating the lay people everywhere to join in the hymn to summon the light of dawn.

Within minutes, all across Hanrahan Town, people slowly knelt in their homes, singing along as if they were members of a sacred choir from the Heavenly Shores, and adding their voices and their tiny motes of faith to the stream of prayers that flowed toward the temple. Soon, more than a thousand voices were raised in song, pushing back against the darkness of the night and the fear that lurked in everyone's hearts after listening to the slow, inexorable march of the demon's drums.

Finally, Germot thought with a smile as the shining golden dome of the chapel grew bright enough to illuminate the entire town in a soft, rose-gold glow of dawn. He had finally gathered enough faith to ensure that no demon could cross the threshold of the temple. The sacred light would not only push back against the darkness and the unholy blue-green above, it also formed a shining curtain around the entire temple, protecting the most devout and faithful people within the temple walls from any danger that came from outside.

Each person's faith might be as tiny as a grain of barley, but for a man skilled in harvesting that faith, they were more than enough to ensure he would never know the pains of hunger, or fear the blades and claws of demons in the night.

Of course, the 'most devout and faithful' people within the chapel who received the strongest protection were also the ones who were able to open up their coin purses to pay for the privilege of that protection. But to Germot, the willingness to loosen the strings of a purse had always been an indication of a person's dedication to the Holy Lord of Light, and he saw no reason that he shouldn't repay their generosity by using the faith he collected from the rest of the town to reinforce the protections afforded to those most 'faithful' people among his flock.

After all, he couldn't protect everyone from the battle to come, but he could protect a chosen few. The rest of the city would have to depend on Disciple Loman and his armies, and Germot could only pray that they would have the strength to smite the demons, because even if he wove the mightiest curtain barriers of light, those barriers weren't capable of killing even a single demon and the people couldn't sing forever.

If someone didn't eliminate the threat, then when the common people whose faith he required faltered... he would lose the protection of his holy barrier and likely his life not long after.

"May the Holy Lord of Light and all the Ascended Guardians in the night sky watch over you, Disciple Loman," Germot said softly. "Our fate is in your hands..."