

210: Unpleasant necessities

Witnessing the Dawnbringers in action always presented a humbling spectacle. This was something Raimond was certain wouldn't change, regardless of how long he continued as a deacon of the Quorum.

Before him, holy knights, serving as the radiant sword of Ittar, moved in seamless harmony, collaborating to repel the monsters threatening their home. Their auras and invocations bathed the artificial space that connected realms in the golden brilliance of a pristine dawn, pushing back the ominous reds from the fires and lava erupting from various breaches in the ground.

Raimond's focus moved to a wounded Dawnbringer, stepping back after a grievous blow from a demon three times their size, their left arm and shield hanging limp. Another Dawnbringer swiftly covered their ally, and Raimond directed the invocation he was maintaining to shift targets.

Radiant Resurgence.

Light surged from beneath Raimond, reaching across the distance between them and enveloping the injured Dawnbringer. Within moments, their arm regained function, and the knight wasted no time in leaping back into the fray.

As for Raimond, he wished his mask didn't obstruct him from wiping away the sweat that covered his brow from the heat and all the effort he was exerting. The mask was a powerful relic, to be sure, and it certainly looked regal enough, but he had never been one for concealing his face. In this case, however, borrowing the power from Deacon Emberwood's mask was better than the alternative, considering how he was the sole healer present.

Typically, the Dawnbringers had dedicated members for this task, but while the order had hastily assembled as many members as possible for this, almost half had been preoccupied with other crises or events across the empire that involved the Hallowed Cabal and Tribe of Sin. Only nine Dawnbringers stood before him, six having recently arrived along with Fynn, and if not for Raimond's presence, they would've had to rely solely on the healing properties of their masterwork armors and artifacts.

It was a thankless task he'd assumed. It brought him back to the days when he had been considered a prospective member of the Dawnbringers himself, and Cadence had been the one to oversee him. She had worked him to the bone for his invocations and his—if he were to be frank—rather impressive mana reserves.

The memory sent a small shiver down his back.

He much preferred his current station. Even his time in the Ecclesiastical Congregation of Sacraments had been favourable to those arduous months.

As Raimond cast another invocation to aid his comrades, his attention stopped briefly on a white-haired figure leaping into the air with a snarl on his face, swiping ethereal green claws at the behemoth of a demon before him. While Fynn's claws tore into the shoulder of the

demon, one of the Dawnbringers swung a glowing greatsword at the demon's legs, cutting into its knees and forcing it down.

Compared to Raimond, Fynn seemed to integrate well with the Dawnbringers. The youth exhibited an almost impeccable sense of combat and cooperation, making Raimond wonder if it was self-taught or acquired during his time with Baroness Hartford. Perhaps a blend of both.

A roar echoed out as yet another demon emerged from the dark rift at the center of this space, even more formidable looking than those already present. At the current pace, it was only a matter of time before they had an archdemon on their hands, and it would be a challenge for even the Dawnbringers to handle something of that level while also dealing with other demons.

Frowning underneath his mask, Raimond turned his gaze to the remnants of the Sanctumbrum. The wooden platform it had once stood on had long since turned to cinders, and the artifact looked nothing like it once had. Now nothing but a molten lump of crimson-black stone, its power had waned considerably.

He glanced to the side, where the once-black dome that encompassed this space had turned a pale grey, with numerous cracks across its face. It seemed as if the Baroness had been correct in that this space would not last for much longer. Mayhap fighting these demons after her departure had even been entirely unnecessary.

Still, a rift to one of the six Blazes was not a threat left unattended. The Sanctumbrum's capability to open such a gate to begin with was a worrying notion, though Raimond hoped this was a unique situation. Otherwise, the Tribe surely would have exploited such a feature before.

It still surprised Raimond that he was as accepting of this current situation as he was, however. The most shocking thing, of course, was that he had decided to aid the Baroness and Miss Hale in their earlier escape.

Certainly, the act itself had not been difficult, with Cadence and the other Dawnbringers too engrossed in battling the demons to see through the illusions hiding the Baroness's disappearance. But while Raimond often acted somewhat lax in his Quorum duties, never before had he committed an act that could so plainly be considered treason.

It would take an extraordinary situation indeed to prompt him to act in such a manner.

Silently, he offered a prayer to Ittar, hoping his lord would show understanding for his actions, all while casting another healing invocation.

Truly, the Baroness had placed him in a rather discomfiting predicament. When Fynn had sought him out to convey the woman's words, she presented Raimond with a choice. Unfortunately for him, what Fynn had told him wasn't something he could ignore, neither the request the Baroness had made nor the information she offered in return.

Perhaps that reaction of his had been another of the Baroness's calculated moves. It had become clear to Raimond that, wary as he had originally been of the woman, he had

significantly underestimated the extent of her machinations and knowledge. Not even he could have foreseen how deep her involvement in current events reached.

It was disconcerting. In truth, there were far too many details that suggested she was an enemy to both the Followers of Ittar and the empire at large. For once, he questioned whether his initial accommodating approach to investigating the woman had been the correct one, or if another deacon should have handled the issue.

If they had, maybe it would have prevented a Vile from nearly manifesting within their realm.

Though it likely would also have spelled an unfortunate end for Miss Hale once the truth of her identity as an incarnate came to light. As far as Raimond knew, there were no methods of saving an incarnate from their fate as vessels for the Viles. Historically, those few incarnates who had appeared all ended in their death, with the one exception leading to the event known as the Desolation Calamity, supposedly causing the collapse of an entire island chain the size of the Luicean Belt.

It would be the height of arrogance and folly to endanger the entire continent and its people for the safety of a single person destined to succumb to the demon inside them. Yet, that was precisely what Baroness Scarlett Hartford had done. And was Raimond to believe the woman herself, she had been justified in doing so. She had done what he had not known possible, and 'saved' Rosa.

He still harbored his doubts regarding that, as well as the Baroness's claims about having brought the Vile under control and contained the threat the ancient demon posed. There had even been a brief moment where he had considered that the woman herself might be a demon in disguise, unlikely as that was. What he first witnessed upon arriving in this space did lend *some* credence to her words, however. Though he had not seen the full process, he had seen Malachi and Rosa perform some indescribable feat that *had* suppressed the presence of the Vile that Raimond had detected within the bard at that point.

It was impressive, but not what convinced him.

No, that happened when the Baroness spoke the Vile's *name*.

Raimond was no expert on demons, but he knew as much as any deacon of the Quorum should be expected to know. He was familiar with the fundamentals of what defined their existence, and the connection their names had to it. He would not claim, however, to be able to discern between a fake name and a true one.

Yet, when the Baroness had spoken that name, he *knew*. As if the name was tied to the very fabric of the world itself in a way that felt irreverent in its inviolability, he had *known* it was a true name.

Baroness Scarlett Hartford knew the name of Anguish, one of the six Viles. She knew the name of a being that stood above even the most powerful of archdemons, who had reigned over one of the Blazes for millennia, and who had been the malefactor responsible for countless conflicts and miseries. A being infamous for its deceptiveness and cunning, whose

name was beyond the level of myths. Some even claimed the Viles didn't have names, as there were never any mentions of them, even in legends.

The idea of the Baroness somehow knowing it would be considered ridiculous to most any member of the Quorum, of this Raimond was certain. That she did spoke to the knowledge the woman possessed, and showed *why* Raimond could not simply ignore her warning. It added more weight to all of her claims.

It was also partly why Raimond had believed her explanation for why they had all been transported away from the Vile's citadel, and why there was a rift connecting to the Blazes at the center of Crowcairn. He also did not doubt that Rosa might have tried to save the villagers, even when aware of their true identities. It aligned with the impression he had gotten of the bard. While his estimation of the Baroness herself had proven incorrect or lacking in several aspects, he at least liked to think that he made a decent assessment of Rosa's character, despite their relatively brief interactions.

Although that might be his own bias speaking. After all, foolish as it might seem to most imperial citizens, the needless bloodshed on the Tribe's side in their endless fight against the empire had always left Raimond despondent. It was amusing, perhaps, that such thoughts still lingered in his mind even after he had embraced the path of one following Ittar's teachings. A path any member of the Tribe would have scorned. They did not seek his sympathy, nor did the empire wish for him to give it. But he supposed there were unturned pages of one's past that one truly never closed.

As one of the demons shot forth a great wave of dark flames from its wings towards the Dawnbringers, Raimond cast another invocation, conjuring a great barrier of light that snaked through the battlefield and blocked the flames where they were. Two of the Dawnbringers soon seized the opportunity while protected by his barrier to cut off both of the demon's wings.

Taking a deep breath, Raimond let his barrier stand a bit longer before dismissing it, once again wishing he could remove the mask and the sweat beneath it. After casting so many invocations throughout both his time in the citadel and this battle, he was finally starting to run low on mana. It only went to show how much had happened when one of the people among the Followers most hailed for his great mana potential became exhausted to this level. It was not often that happened.

Now he was beginning to understand why some others were so envious of him.

A chuckle escaped him as his thoughts wandered back to the Baroness. From what he had seen, she relied a lot on that necklace artifact of hers to avoid running out herself. During their time in the citadel, he had caught more than one disgruntled look from her, seemingly wondering about his apparently inexhaustible supply of mana. At least there were *some* areas where the woman didn't stupefy the imagination.

These recent events had served to both teach Raimond a lot more about the woman and make her ever more ineffably enigmatic to his understanding. He believed there was meaning behind the woman's role and the knowledge she possessed. Or rather, he was certain of it, for there were far too many things about her that stood out. He couldn't precisely define what that meaning might be or why he believed it was there, but that intuition came from all the

various observations he had made of the woman. There was something about her that extended far beyond the natural, and perhaps she was even a presence similar to that of the Augur's.

That possibility left him concerned in more ways than he wanted to acknowledge, but he could at least find some slight comfort in that one of his biggest questions about the Baroness had found an answer. He had once worried about what motivated the woman's actions and what it could mean in regards to her position towards the Followers, but unlike many other things about her, the answer to that had turned out to, at least in part, be rather simple.

The Baroness wanted to protect those close to her. The effort she had gone to in order to help Rosa, someone whose fate seemed locked in place, showcased how far the Baroness would go for that goal. That, at least, was a sentiment Raimond could understand and respect. In this world, few things were as beautiful as the connections that tied people together, and a desire to protect those around you was one of the purest in his opinion.

Though it could undoubtedly lead to ends most dire for the world at large, as it might almost have done here. As with most things, there was always a dark side to such a desire.

While lamenting this, Raimond's attention trailed Fynn as the young man assisted another Dawnbringer in dispatching a smaller, four-legged demon.

It did not appear as if any of the Baroness's entourage hesitated in serving her. Raimond was uncertain whether Shin, Allyssa, and Fynn comprehended the full extent of her actions, but he also did not think they would trust her without reason. Both Allyssa and Shin were kind souls, of that, he had no doubt, and while Fynn might exude a certain innocence enticing to some, he was not as easily manipulated as one might assume.

Suddenly, the ground shook as a colossal clawed hand began to emerge from the rift, causing both the rift itself and the dome enclosing the space to tremble.

Raimond paused, narrowing his eyes.

The instability of the space and the threat this approaching demon posed did not escape the Dawnbringer's attention. Three of them, led by Cadence's domineering figure, began to force their way through the demons in front of them. Their armors, bathed in a brilliant light, provided temporary protection as they reached the rift, endeavouring to beat back the demon that was trying to escape through the now-failing portal.

Raimond sighed as he cast his invocations, drawing from his dwindling mana supply—something Cadence no doubt expected him to do—and creating barriers to thwart the other demons from surrounding the trio completely.

The rift itself remained unaffected by their attacks, but as their empowered weapons slashed at the bulbous and monstrous body of the demon trying to leave it—a single look had been enough for Raimond to determine that this *was* an archdemon—they did succeed in forcing it back for the time being. Simultaneously, the dome continued to shake as the rift gradually began to diminish in size.

The remaining Dawnbringers amplified their efforts, bringing their full auras to bear as they dedicated themselves to cutting into their enemies, an effort Raimond helped in but wasn't entirely convinced was necessary. He suspected that none of the demons could escape from here without suffering considerable backlash. Since this space resembled the Blazes more than the Material Realm, travel between them should still be restricted for most demons.

As if to confirm his suspicions, one of the demons did attempt an escape, losing one of its arms as it fled past two Dawnbringers and rammed its body into the barrier enclosing them all. It was immediately thrown back, crashing into the ground. There, Fynn crashed into it with the power of a mighty beast, crushing part of its chest in a blow that cracked the earth beneath.

The space around them continued destabilizing as the battle against the demons unfolded, but Cadence and her fellow Dawnbringers succeeded in delaying the archdemon's entrance until the rift had decreased in size to the point where nothing could come through it anymore. By the time it had almost entirely disappeared, the dome surrounding them bore a deep grey color, interspersed with dozens upon dozens of cracks. Though some of the strongest demons were still standing, the ground was littered with the bodies of their dead or dying kin, while none of the Dawnbringers had fallen.

"Cadence," Raimond called out. "If you'll pardon me saying so, I think it best if we take our leave from here."

Standing where the rift had been, Cadence, the Second Light of the Dawnbringers, turned her head after blocking a blow from a demon resembling a mix of a bat and a bipedal wolf. She looked in Raimond's direction, then seemed to give a single nod before issuing the order.

Without hesitation, the other Dawnbringers disengaged from their fights and began to depart, leaving several angered demons. Raimond lingered for just a moment to ensure that young Fynn followed suit before turning around and hurrying towards the dome separating this space from the outside world. The shouts of the demons, some of it resembling words, resounded from behind him as he stepped through the grey barrier, and after a brief duration of numb discomfort that covered his entire body, he found himself standing in the darkened streets of Crowcairn.

He looked around for a moment, gazing out over the empty buildings, before snapping his fingers. A good quarter of the area around him lit up as if it was day.

There was still some mana left in him.

Turning his head, he stepped away from the dome that stood at the center of the village, scanning for the others. The Dawnbringers had exited in different places, and he spotted some standing with weapons at the ready while waiting for any demons to follow out of the space. Presumably, they already had the village center surrounded.

A brief silence ensued as the cracks running through the grey dome expanded, resembling bolts of white lightning, yet no demons emerged. Then, suddenly and in the blink of an eye, the dome soundlessly shattered, collapsing in on itself and disappearing into a single ball.

The space where it had stood was left completely empty, devoid of demons, the Sanctumbrum, or the Blaze-affected landscape that had been there. Even the earth had been cut, leaving a smooth crater that stretched out before Raimond.

The Dawnbringers surrounding the crater soon started converging on Raimond's position.

One of them, a fellow named Westcott if Raimond was correct—it was sometimes difficult to tell with the armor they wore—stepped up to Fynn as the youth approached. “What was your name again, young man? Your help back there was appreciated. It's clear you have a lot of potential.”

Fynn simply stared at the man, as though considering whether he was supposed to answer that or not. Raimond decided he would step in to help.

“This spirited exemplar of stoicism is Fynn, a loyal retainer of a certain acquaintance of mine who proved valuable in managing the current situation.” Raimond began to display one of his well-established smiles, only to remember the mask he wore. Instead, he stepped over to Fynn and rested a hand on the young man's shoulder. “Quite dependable, is he not?”

Westcott eyed Raimond briefly before nodding. “Yes.”

Fynn also turned to study him, and Raimond shifted to meet the youth's calm gaze. “Something on your mind?”

“Your clothes are different. And I thought that mask was supposed to be taken to that Congregation you're part of.”

Raimond blinked. Well, at least he now had an answer to whether Fynn was aware of his true identity.

Removing his mask, he offered the previously-abandoned smile. “The circumstances called for me to adopt another role for a time, but fret not, for I remain the dashing and charming priest you have most certainly grown accustomed to.”

“I wasn't worried,” Fynn said.

“No, no, there is no need for the false bravado in my presence. I have a will forged of steel, so you can be quite honest with me.”

“This isn't the time for your jokes, Deacon Abram,” a woman's voice said. Raimond turned to find Cadence walking towards them, accompanied by three Dawnbringers. That made all nine of the present Dawnbringers gathered, all still wearing their masks.

Raimond adopted a serious expression. She wasn't wrong, of course. The situation remained more severe than any other, and his actions from here would decide a great deal of things.

As Cadence stopped in front of Raimond, she glanced at Fynn before directing her gaze to the distant citadel visible on the horizon. “These events diverted us from our intended destination on your orders, Abram. While I will not disagree with the necessity of it, I hope it has not complicated matters for us. Botho, Diandre.” She raised a hand, gesturing to the edge of the

village. “Secure the mounts and inform the duke’s people. Ask them to delay any investigations until later. For some reason, it seems the citadel has calmed down compared to before, but we’ll head for it immediately.”

Two of the Dawnbringers departed, and Cadence returned her attention to Raimond, a harsher tone in her voice. “Upon our arrival, I sensed an incredibly threatening presence from those individuals you were conversing with. I trusted in your assurance that you’d *handle it* while we dealt with the demons, but it seems they all managed to escape. Were they the ones responsible for what transpired here?”

Raimond met the gaze of her mask, resisting the urge to flash a disarming smile.

Fynn remained beside him, silently observing them both.

“I’m afraid explaining the situation in its entirety will take time, but I do believe the immediate danger has passed,” Raimond said.

“I’m still seeing a Vile’s citadel,” Cadence replied.

“Yes, well, I’m rather confounded by that as well.”

She remained silent, studying him. Finally, a small sigh escaped her as she turned around and started to leave, the other Dawnbringers joining her. “I’ll be requesting of Deacon Solnate to be allowed presence when you provide that explanation, Abram. Knowing you, I do expect it to be thorough.”

Raimond did flash his smile to the woman’s back, though he did not feel quite as excited on the inside.

Perhaps he needed to reevaluate his perception of the Baroness after all. For while he had none but himself to blame in the end, surely it would take the most conniving of demons to bait him into a situation such as this.

After Cadence and the others had left, only Raimond and Fynn remained.

“You’re weird,” the young man said.

“...Yes, thank you for that observation.”