

191: Harbored revelations

Scarlett and her party once again found themselves seated in their carriage, steadily traversing a worn dirt road, accompanied by a small contingent of knights under the command of Sir Franke Home. Scarlett's gaze was fixed outside the window, where the morning sun had recently pierced through a somber sea of clouds, casting a warm glow across the horizon.

Following the skirmish between the duke's men and the demons that had appeared during the night, the original company had been split in two. Sir Home had opted to keep those recovering from injuries and in need of more time to recover in the cavern, along with roughly half of those still fit for battle. That group would both keep watch over things in the swamp while also commencing the arduous work of dealing with the deceased Vilewyrms. The rest, under Sir Home's leadership, were entrusted with escorting Scarlett back to Bridgespell, where they would report the situation to Duke Valentino and decide on a course of action.

Neither Sir Home nor the duke had likely foreseen that the unexpected confrontation with a demon when embarking on this mission. Now, having weathered a battle with not only the Vilewyrms but also *other* demons, the knight captain was understandably on edge regarding the unfolding events. Though he seemed to have his reservations about leaving some of his men behind in the swamp—where another attack could easily occur—he believed that decisive action was necessary, given the circumstances.

Scarlett understood that sentiment, even though she knew the particular threat he was concerned about wasn't as 'looming' as he might think. At least not in the fashion he was expecting. While Malachi's demons could be dangerous, yes, Scarlett doubted that the woman would be responsible for any direct attacks from here on. She would be busy with other things.

Somewhere along their journey, two scouts clad in light armor joined their entourage. They approached Sir Home, their conversation audible enough for Scarlett to overhear.

"Captain, we tracked the demons' path, just as you ordered. It led us to a village called Crowcairn," one of the riders reported.

"Crowcairn?" Sir Home's brow furrowed in thought.

"Yes. It's a village roughly an hour and a half hour's march to the west," the rider explained.

Scarlett's own brows knitted into a frown. That was strange.

"Did you find any signs of the village being attacked?" Sir Home asked.

The rider shook his head. "No, Captain. We did not enter the village itself in case the demons were hiding there, but we observed people moving around and they appeared unharmed."

Sir Home's gauntleted fists tightened on his horse's reins. "Could that mean that whoever unleashed the demons is hiding within that village?" he seemed to ponder aloud.

Scarlett watched the man mull over this new information, her own thoughts also wondering what to make of it all. It was undeniably suspicious. Neither Malachi nor her demons would have carelessly left behind traces. She was very experienced at concealing her presence. Even *if* the woman had been careless, the tracks wouldn't have led to Crowcairn itself.

This had to have been deliberate.

“We must return to Bridgespell without delay and apprise His Grace of these developments,” Sir Home eventually said, his expression grim. “This could have grave implications for the entire empire.”

He signaled for another knight and a fresh horse, ordering them to ride swiftly to Bridgespell and relay this information. He also instructed them to seek the duke's permission to assemble another force for an immediate investigation of Crowcairn upon his return. Time was of the essence.

The knight saluted and sped away on horseback. As Sir Home watched the retreating messenger along the road, Scarlett kept her eyes on the knight captain, considering what these developments entailed for *her*.

It wasn't exactly bad, per se. In fact, it aligned quite well with what she had contemplated doing herself on several occasions. If she wanted to, she *could* exploit this situation to her advantage, and she'd had several plans related to doing so. The difference was that she had eventually chosen not to go through with any of them, while Malachi clearly had.

Strangely, the thought left a bitter taste in her mouth.

“What are your thoughts on this?” she asked, having opened the carriage window as Sir Home's horse rode past them.

The knight turned his head, his creased forehead reflecting the complex contemplations brought about by the recent revelations. “I wish I had a clear answer, Baroness. The presence of individuals in the duke's territory involved in dealings with demons is beyond reprehensible, yet it appears to be a harsh reality. We can only count ourselves fortunate that you assisted us in locating and defeating one of the demons this early, preventing it from further contaminating these lands. I can only pray to Ittar that we can root out the source of this menace before it's too late.”

Scarlett's gaze remained on him for a few seconds. “...And what, exactly, do you believe it is that you might need to ‘root out’?” she asked.

“Whoever these people are who have made unholy pacts with these demons, and whose actions and very existences pose a threat to the empire and its citizens,” the man replied with unwavering determination in his tone.

“I see.” Scarlett's eyes lingered on him for a moment longer, then she turned her attention back to the passing landscape. “A very imperial response, indeed.”



Raimond indulged in the crispy crust of his morning loaf, perched on a low stone wall by the roadside near the outskirts of Crowcairn. His gaze meandered over the inhabitants of the village as they bustled through their daily routines with an air of resolve and purpose. Despite the brisk morning chill, the villagers seemed untroubled as they moved among the wooden houses, dusting off worn garments, and engaging in animated conversations, the resonating clang of a blacksmith's hammer echoing between the homes.

While Raimond wouldn't exactly label Crowcairn as quaint, there was an undeniable sense of community enveloping the settlement that warmed his heart.

A pair of young children, bundled in thicker clothing than the adults, ambled by with their mother, burdened by a heavy basket. Raimond offered them a warm smile as they passed.

Both of the children jumped at the sight, their eyes widening as if they hadn't noticed him before, quickly seeking refuge behind their mother's skirts. The woman scolded them gently, her gaze shifting to Raimond as she offered an apology, though her smile and sorry expression seemed somewhat forced.

Raimond didn't mind it in the least, maintaining his benevolent smile as he wished her a good day and bestowed a blessing from Ittar.

They were far from the only ones in the village who appeared less than thrilled by his presence here.

It was, of course, most apparent in the children, but many of the adults failed to conceal their discomfort as well. It manifested in subtle ways — lingering gazes, hushed tones when he drew near, and their—sometimes—polite but evasive responses to his inquiries.

It wasn't the typical reception a priest would receive in rural settlements like Crowcairn.

Taking another delectable bite of his savory piece of loaf, Raimond brushed away the fallen crumbs from his pristine white robes. At least the bread was good.

His attention shifted upward as he noticed the village head strolling down the road, having just left the blacksmith's home. The man's hair was slightly more disheveled compared to when Raimond had last seen him, and there was a heaviness to his steps that hadn't been there before. Nevertheless, he greeted Raimond with a warm smile as he passed on his way out of the village, stopping for a moment to exchange some words.

"Father Abraham. A pleasure seeing you out this fine morning," the man's deep voice resonated. "I see you've acquired some of Benita's bread. It may be a simple fare, but I hope it suits your tastes."

“The same to you, Mister Clifton.” Raimond affectionately shook the loaf in his hand. “Indeed, I did, and it was delightful. Perhaps one of the finest loaves I’ve tasted in quite some time. I must remember to visit Madame Benita later and convey my compliments.”

“I’m sure she will appreciate that,” the man said, though his attention seemed to momentarily drift as his gaze followed the road leading out of the village.

“Let’s hope so,” Raimond replied, although he couldn’t shake the feeling that Madame Benita hadn’t been particularly enthusiastic about providing him with the bread when he’d requested it. Nevertheless, he was never one to give up on good food.

The village head, apparently not finding anything of particular note in the distance, turned his attention back to Raimond. “In any case, I hope your stay here has been enjoyable thus far, Father. If I might ask, how long do you intend to remain?”

Raimond brushed a wayward lock of golden hair from his eyes, meeting the man’s query with a radiant smile. “Ah, who can say? I find Crowcairn rather charming, and predicting the whims of a wandering priest, guided only by his own two feet and the will of Ittar, is always a challenge. So, I suppose I’ll depart when I can no longer partake of the kindness you offer without feeling shame for my freeloading ways.”

Just as Raimond uttered those words, a burly, bald-headed man passed by with a log carried over his shoulder, shooting a brief glare at him while continuing down the road out of the village.

The village head chuckled lightly, seemingly unruffled by that statement. “I think I understand what you mean, Father. Life on the road for much of the year must be exhausting, especially in the colder seasons. Many of this village’s residents aren’t accustomed to having priests among us, so please excuse their unease. To them, the clergy is a distant concept, spoken of only by word of mouth. For the majority, it’s their first time interacting with one of you, and they don’t quite know what to expect.”

Raimond nodded. “It’s not an entirely surprising for a place like this. I don’t fault them for their discomfort with my presence. I’m confident that our relationship will improve with time, and for now, I’m rather content as things stand.” He playfully waved his bread once more.

“I take it that means you’ll be gracing us with your presence for at least a few more days?”

“Hmm.” Raimond stroked his chin with his free hand. “Well, as I mentioned, we shall see. But perhaps.”

“I, for one, would welcome that,” the village head said. “But I hope you don’t feel obligated to stay longer than necessary. We understand if you have other duties.”

“Oh, indeed, I have those,” Raimond replied with a wry smile. “Fortunately, I’ve honed the art of postponement and delegation to a fine skill, ensuring that my responsibilities no longer weigh upon me. Rest assured, I won’t be departing today, at the very least.”

The man's expression remained amused as he chuckled. "While I don't envy your superiors, Father, I'm pleased to hear it. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must attend to my own duties, ones that I unfortunately can't delay."

"Don't let me hinder your diligence. I'm sure we'll have many more opportunities to speak."

With that, the village head bid his goodbyes and continued down the dirt road, leaving the village and heading towards a collection of smaller homesteads in that direction. Raimond's eyes followed him as he departed.

That man, at least, was a much more accomplished actor than the others. None of his true thoughts regarding Raimond's words had shown on his face.

After a while, Raimond redirected his attention back to the village, savoring the last morsel of his bread as he observed the residents.

He imagined that Ava wasn't too pleased with his prolonged absence, especially considering he had promised to return to his duties immediately after wrapping up matters in Bridgespell. However, developments had taken an unexpected turn. None of them could have foreseen that a sudden divine revelation would be given by the Augur.

Her revelations were typically vague and elusive, but this time, it had been both cryptic *and* unusually detailed. During Raimond's time as a deacon, the Augur had never unveiled a revelation that included such a precise location of where the event at the focus of that revelation would occur while simultaneously offering scant insight into what that event actually was.

Did it signify an impending threat, a golden opportunity, or something entirely different? The entire Quorum was in the dark, but they had little choice but to investigate the matter.

The news had undoubtedly caught the other deacons off guard as well, especially given the Augur's reclusive nature since the incident at the Sanctuary of Ittar. Her reticence about the events of that night had puzzled many, and some of the others saw it as a sign of the woman's deteriorating condition. While it might have been premature considering her age, historical records documented instances of previous Augurs succumbing to the burdens of their position at a young age, so it was not outside the realm of possibility.

It was the unfortunate reality that came with the role.

However, from what Raimond had been told, the Augur had displayed remarkable clarity during the conclave where she had received the revelation. Although it had been some time since he himself had last seen her, he was heartened to hear that she was not too far gone yet.

Nonetheless, he couldn't help but question the seeming convenience of it all — the revelation just happened to concern a location so close to his current whereabouts. Perhaps Ittar was at work with him specifically in mind, but Raimond was cautious about jumping to hasty conclusions.

It remained to be seen whether this was a blessing or a curse, though he unfortunately harbored suspicions towards the latter.

His gaze lingered on two middle-aged women as they crossed the road a short distance from him, conversing in hushed tones. Although he couldn't catch most of their words, they seemed to be discussing recent events in the area.

Presumably, that meant it was mostly about him. But he wasn't the only visitor to this village that had come in the past couple of days. While the circumstances surrounding his visit to this nondescript village on the far outskirts of the Bridgespell area left him with numerous unanswered questions, that wasn't the extent of his curiosity.

He wondered what Rosa was up to at the moment.

Though he had spent much of his time in Crowcairn familiarising himself with the villagers and investigating what role the village might play in the Augur's latest revelation, that wasn't all he had been doing. It would take a man with far greater restraint than him to resist the urge to learn more about what had brought a companion of Baroness Scarlett Harford to this place, and at such an unusual time. As such, he had already delved deeper into learning about who this 'Malachi' person that Rosa apparently came here to meet was.

From what he had gathered, Malachi was a reclusive individual who lived just beyond Crowcairn and rarely interacted with the villagers themselves. The locals didn't have much more information to offer, either because they chose not to share or simply because they didn't know more.

It certainly left him in thought.

His attention was caught by the pair of children he had seen earlier, now racing through the village while laughing, soon stopping to chase each other around a tree.

He smiled. The innocence of children was a blessed existence, no matter the circumstances or location. He watched them play for a while until their mother arrived, putting a stop to it for now and guiding them on their way.

Even as the small family disappeared around a corner, Raimond's gaze remained fixed on the spot where they had last been.

His smile faded.

... While his inquiries among the villagers had yielded little substantial information, either related to this Malachi individual or his investigation, that did not mean he couldn't draw his own conclusions from the observations he made. In many ways, he was the perfect candidate for this assignment, and it was fortunate that the Followers could send him to assess the situation before acting themselves.

Perhaps it was the providence of Ittar at work after all. If so, he couldn't help but feel a pang of guilt for thinking that it might have been best if he *wasn't* the one chosen for this task.

The teachings of Ittar painted the world as a harsh place, where it was the responsibility of those treading upon its lands with empathy and reason in their heart to shine their light and rescue those trapped in suffering. Even Ittar himself didn't possess the power to save everyone, and history had witnessed acts of cruelty committed by even the most well-

intentioned individuals. Far too often, the light of day revealed the nuanced complexities that plagued humans as a people.

Raimond rose from his perch, smoothing his robes as he surveyed the dwellings before him. He didn't know what fate held for this place, and he could not speak for those who lived here, but within him lingered a hopeful wish that the events forewarned by the Augur's divine revelation wouldn't unfold in the manner he feared.

He started walking.

However, if his apprehensions proved justified, he had a priestly duty to fulfill, and that duty took precedence over all else.

For that was the solemn oath that he had sworn.