

193: Sanctum

There was a palpable weight that loomed over Crowcairn today, Raimond had noted as he interacted with the villagers and carried on with his investigations. It hadn't been immediately apparent in the morning, but like an ominous wave spreading through the settlement, it had steadily become more pronounced the more time passed.

Currently, he found himself near the outskirts of the village, taking momentary shelter from the watchful looks of its residents as he considered the implications of it all. Resting on a low stone wall that encircled a small plot of land that might have been reserved for livestock during the warmer seasons, he gazed across the rolling hills surrounding Crowcairn.

Despite his observations about their odd behaviour, his other interactions with the people here today had been as unproductive as the day before. Mayhap even more so, as he would dare say they were more distrustful of him now than they had been earlier. That, or they had simply become worse at concealing their suspicion under the prevailing atmosphere.

Regardless of the reason, with the way things were unfolding, it seemed only a matter of time before events escalated in one direction or another. Where that direction might lead and whether he would be involved in it remained uncertain, but the signs of something brewing beneath the surface were unmistakable.

Though he wasn't fond of the methods themselves and considered them somewhat *louche*, he had contemplated employing alternative means to advance his investigations from this point forward. If his concerns were valid—which they often were—continuing his current approach was unlikely to yield results in time.

His attention was caught by a figure appearing on the horizon, passing over one of the hills and approaching the village at a speed that would have been impressive for a normal person. Raimond also noted that they weren't following the road; instead, they were running across the open terrain as if their very life depended on it. Not that there was anything following them.

Raimond's brows furrowed as he observed the individual, and after a moment's thought, he motioned with his hands in the air in front of him.

Luminous Gaze.

A faint pulse of light followed the path traced by his hand, invisible to all but those positioned immediately behind it. A second later, that light sharpened, becoming more defined and showing a magnified image of the figure.

It was a man in his twenties, dressed in ordinary clothing, drenched in sweat, and wearing a hard-set expression on his bearded face as he closed in on the village. He was someone Raimond recognized, but he certainly seemed in a hurry.

For a brief moment, Raimond considered signaling to the man to inquire about the cause of his distress, but in the end, he chose not to. Instead, he continued to watch as the man reached

Crowcairn, coming to an exhausted stop and leaning against one of the houses while catching his breath.

One of the villagers, a middle-aged woman with her hair bundled behind her, stared at him and said something. Raimond lamented that he had no aeromancy spell to listen in from this distance, but there was not much to be done about that. The bearded man shook his head and said something in response, and the woman's eyes widened as she pointed deeper into the village. Giving her a nod in acknowledgment, the man resumed his journey, entering Crowcairn and soon disappearing from Raimon's view.

Frowning slightly, Raimond left his resting spot and began to move. It would appear something significant had occurred, and given the circumstances, he couldn't simply ignore it. As he moved, he silently cast another spell that enveloped the air around him, weaving the light into a complex shape that soon lay itself upon him in an inconspicuous layer that blended into the surroundings.

Veil of the Unseen.

It was not a spell he used often, lest he find himself developing unsavory habits—or worse, an unpalatable reputation—but sometimes the situation demanded what it did of him. He was aware of various countermeasures to this technique, but he suspected none were available to these villagers.

As he advanced deeper into the village, unnoticed by its residents and guided by the trail of reactions that the bearded man's abrupt arrival had caused, Raimond eventually spotted the man in question standing beside the village head near the smithy.

Approaching with a certain amount of caution, he began to make out the words of their conversation.

“Are you *certain*?” the village head asked with a brusque tone, devoid of the hospitality he had displayed before Raimond.

Wiping away sweat from his forehead, the bearded fellow spoke between breaths. “Y-Yes, absolutely. They *were* the duke's men, no doubt. They passed through our land with little regard, and they didn't take kindly to my brother's attempt to ask their purpose.”

“Foolish. He should never have approached them.”

Raimond kept a watchful eye on the village head as he positioned himself a few meters away from the two men. Neither of them displayed any awareness of his presence, nor did they seem concerned about discussing their matter openly.

“That's exactly what I told him, but he wouldn't listen,” the bearded man said. “We're lucky that he didn't, though, because I hid nearby and overheard their response.”

“Which was?”

“They claimed they were searching for *demons*.”

The village head's expression twisted into one of pure resentment. "...Blazes and their spawns take that *witch*."

Raimond narrowed his eyes, studying the man. During his time in the village, he had not detected any demonic presences. However, if Duke Valentino's men were conducting a search for demons, it was unlikely to be without reason.

This was undoubtedly unwelcome news.

For a few seconds, the village head stood in silence, his jaw clenched. Eventually, he sighed heavily and looked at the other man. "How long until they arrive? And what of your brother?"

"I don't know if they suspected him of anything, but they didn't let him go after he'd spoken with them. I think they decided to interrogate him while continuing their journey. As soon as I could, I ran here to inform you, so I can't say more than that. Their group had horses and carriages, which means they're stuck taking the east-bound trails before turning south here, but this was perhaps three or four ago. They'll probably be here within the hour."

The village head's mood appeared to darken even further.

"...What should we do?" the bearded man asked. "Can't we simply let them come here? There are no demons in the village, so we should be safe."

The village head seemed to consider it for a while before letting out another long sigh. "We can't afford to take that risk. It's possible that the soldiers were lying, and they already have some information. They may be using the supposed presence of demons as pretext. But even if they weren't lying, if it concerns demons, the duke's men will search every corner of the village without sparing any effort, no matter what we say. If they find *anything* they might consider 'suspicious', it could very well spell disaster for all of us. By then, it would be too late for us to do anything."

The man's words did little to alleviate the suspicions that Raimond himself had nurtured during his stay in the village, nor did they cast the villagers' motives in a particularly favorable light.

The village head waved over a woman who had been watching their conversation from the entrance to a nearby home. He gestured towards the smithy when she approached. "Help Delmar gather some of the boys and prepare the Shrine in the commons."

The woman's face scrunched together in what was perhaps a mix of shock and apprehension. "What's happening?"

"The duke's men are advancing towards our village. We have little choice but to act now before it's too late."

Both concern and anger flashed across the woman's expression, and she immediately hurried off without another word. The village head then turned back to the man he had been speaking with. "The duke and the empire's folly continue to blind them to the truth, but we can't do

much about it when like this. We'll see what we can do for your brother, but otherwise, he knows what to do. I trust that the same applies for you."

The bearded man gave a meaningful nod. "Yes, Chief."

"Good. Then help me spread the word and get our other preparations in order."

With that, the two men went their separate ways. Raimond's mood remained heavy as he followed the village head, observing the village spring into action with an unexpected vigor for a village so outwardly quaint. It was as if every person knew their role as soon as they heard the news, from the youngest child trailing behind their mother to the adults bringing out bags of belongings onto the streets en masse.

Confirming Raimond's decision to remain concealed as the right one, the village head and some other villagers eventually shifted their focus to him and his current whereabouts, clearly deciding that his was a presence they no longer had to pretend to tolerate. Several people searched various hiding spots and asked around, attempting to determine when and where he had last been seen.

Perhaps he should have considered himself fortunate that he had spotted the man who had come to warn the village. Even more so that the villagers lacked someone who could spot him. Raimond had already been aware that not all the villagers were as ordinary as they appeared, but it would have put him in a rather awkward position if they had a proficient tracker among them.

When no one succeeded in locating him for the first half-hour, it seemed the villagers concluded that he had left while they weren't looking, perhaps thinking he was a spy for the duke's men. They returned their focus to whatever preparations they were performing. What exactly those were, Raimond wasn't entirely certain. However, it was evident that they were getting ready to depart.

Or, at least, that was what it seemed like. They didn't start leaving the village, however, even though the women and men held their belongings as if before a mass exodus. Instead, they gathered in one of the village's larger open spaces. Carefully navigating through the dozens of people in the crowd, ensuring not to let his robes touch anyone and masking his presence, Raimond observed the villager's expressions while making his way to the edge of the space. Then he shifted his attention to the center, where he saw the blacksmith and four other men carrying a heavy object onto a simple wooden platform that had been raised there.

Raimond's heart sank as he recognized the object, even though it only confirmed what he had already held to be but a fraction from the truth.

The men set the object down on the platform, each of them straining under its weight even when distributed among themselves. Forged of a deep, black stone-like material, the object was a simple rectangular pedestal. Its surface, however, seemed to shimmer in a manner that defied the senses when hit by the afternoon light. Even from a distance, Raimond could feel the waves of energy emanating from the relic, weight and demanding, as if it sought to assert its dominance over the world. It sent shivers down his spine, even as it offered but a glimpse of whatever power the relic had been carved out of.

A Sanctumbrum, the Followers called it, though the exact terminology mattered little. There were only two groups with access to such a relic: the Hallowed Cabal and the Tribe of Sin.

Not far from Raimond, a boy excitedly tugged at his mother's clothes, gesticulating at the object with wide eyes. The mother's expression aligned more with the serious atmosphere in the village as she hushed her son and spoke to him in soft whispers that Raimond couldn't discern. He simply observed the familiar exchange with complicated emotions within.

It had been decades since the last confirmed Tribe enclave had been ousted from the empire's lands, to his knowledge. He had considered it improbable that any remnants remained after the numerous purges—for that was what they were—carried out by the empire's elite. Yet before him was an entire commune; seemingly each and every member was part of it. He wondered how long they had lived here and how they had managed to evade detection. It should have been impossible on the scale he was witnessing.

Soon, the village head reappeared, standing before the villagers on the platform next to the Sanctumbrum, dressed in the black robes of the Tribe, white lines drawn across his face. His demeanor was grave as he addressed the crowd.

“By now, you should all be aware of the situation,” he spoke loudly, his voice carrying over the area. “It's sudden, and I know that it's much to ask of you, but fate has forced our hand, and we have yet the strength to push back. Today, many of us will have to return to the Foundlands.”

Heads nodded, almost as if on cue, an almost tangible resolve seemed to sweep over the villagers, catching even Raimond slightly off guard.

The village head turned his attention northwest, where one of the roads led out of the village and into the distance. The villagers' gazes followed. Now, Raimond could make out some movement there on the horizon—horsemen and a small contingent of wagons. He didn't need *Luminous Gaze* to confirm that it was likely the duke's men the bearded man had mentioned.

Supposedly, they had come here in search of demons, but to the law and the people of the empire, those of the Tribe were scarcely different.

Raimond's eyes swept over the villagers, stopping on the determined faces of those adults who were likely aware of that harsh reality. He did not know how they would fare against a contingent of soldiers and knights, but it seemed their chances mattered little to them if it came to that.

Though with a Sanctumbrum in their possession, there was no guarantee that it would come to that, if what he knew about the relics was true.

Suddenly, it felt like Raimond's entire being *trembled* as something passed through him, and he turned his gaze towards the relic that stood beside the village head. Its black form seemed to quiver along with the world around it, as if it absorbed and drew upon the very essence of its surroundings, spitting in the face of the natural order. The village head touched a hand against its surface, and his arms seemed to warp slightly like in a mirage the closer they were to it.

“We are all prepared to give our lives for the truth that we aspire to,” the man declared. “I suspect some of us will have to do just that today. But a meaningless sacrifice is a sin greater than even our ignorance, for only those who continue to aspire can become Truthful. We have had little time to prepare, so the Shrine won’t be able to open our passage yet.”

As if an imperceptible fragment of reality itself had shattered, a resonance emanated from the Sanctumbrum, expanding outward like an invisible ripple that coursed through Raimond with a sensation that defied logic and contradicted itself. Though he couldn’t see the phenomenon, he could somehow tell that it extended beyond the crowd and the village itself, enshrouding the settlement like an impenetrable veil. Then, as if decrying Ittar’s very existence and invoking a chilling void, a grey dome materialized around Crowcairn. It distorted the image of the sun in the sky and cast a desolate, cold light over everything beneath it.

Although he had read about this occurrence, he had never witnessed it himself until now. Even so, the Phantom Sanctum was a well-documented—if poorly understood—phenomenon that had frequently proven a difficult obstacle for those facing the Tribe in the past. While it was every bit as unsettling as Raimond had heard, he did not think this barrier matched some of the more extreme examples that had been described. Some records spoke of Sanctums that blanketed entire cities, blocking all external light.

“Aspirants of the truth, brothers and sisters,” the village head called out. “Our moment of reckoning has arrived, and the benighted agents of the empire have come to our doorstep to impose their willfully ignorant ‘justice’ upon us. While our goal is not to perish here today, let us demonstrate precisely what we strive for. Let us offer them a glimpse of the truth.”

Swelling into a chorus of resounding agreement, the villagers’ voices were raised in a fervent unity that Raimond could only watch in somber silence, feeling the pervasive mood of it all wash over him. He couldn’t predict the outcome or which side would prevail in the coming conflict, but even in the face of all this, that was not where his primary concern lay.

One consuming thought dominated his mind, fueled by suspicion and misgivings, the mere possibility of which unsettled him more profoundly than even the unnatural reality birthed by the Sanctumbrum’s power. For the Augur’s revelations were not to be underestimated, and while the woman’s warning *might* have pertained to the events unfolding before his eyes, Raimond couldn’t shake his doubts.

Suppose, just suppose, that there existed another reason for her augury — a future occurrence whose consequences potentially eclipsed even those of the current situation. What could conceivably warrant such a description?

Raimond pondered this disconcerting notion, and the conclusion he arrived at was far from reassuring.

He offered a prayer to Ittar above, seeking guidance and protection for what lay ahead.