



FAITH UNASSAILABLE

By Josh Colón

Outside Imer, 611 AR

Dartan Vilmon held his great sword, *Censure*, at side-guard as all around him hundreds of skorne warriors fled past in their retreat from the holy city of Imer. The foreign soldiers had long ceased testing their skill against Vilmon; the two-dozen skorne bodies lying in a circle around him served as sufficient warning to all who would cross blades with the paladin of the Order of the Wall. Once sure the enemy had truly gone, Vilmon shifted from his stance and visualized the holy fire within *Censure* flowing back into himself. The heat moved through his arm and into his heart, where it would be stoked until once again needed. As he completed this meditation, the mystical flames igniting his blade's filigree flickered and extinguished. Steel to flame, flame to steel—as he had learned as an initiate long ago.

Assessing the aftermath of the battle, Vilmon was pleased to see his paladins still stood and had held their ground, having defended the force's flank as Exemplar knights cut through the skorne lines like a sword driven by divine will. Overseeing Vilmon's paladins was Champion Gerion Vance, who spoke to his fellow knights of the Wall atop his steed, while Senior Warder Junia oversaw the Knights Exemplar under Vilmon's command. He noted how well both these particular groups of knights had fought together, complementing their strengths and weaknesses.

The two leaders approached their field commander, and it was Champion Gerion who spoke first as he dismounted. "By the Creator, that was a hell of a fight. Some of those skorne really knew how to swing a sword."

Vilmon allowed himself a small smile at his friend's bravado, no doubt spurred by the presence of their Exemplar allies.

Exemplar Warder Junia had developed a cool tolerance for her paladin counterpart's casual demeanor. After a short beat, she interjected. "High Paladin Vilmon, my knights have secured the area, but some of our errants report skirmishes outside the city's walls. Should we prepare a counterattack?"

Vilmon contemplated his options. "No, we were sent here to bolster Imer's defenses. Others will be sent to clean up any stragglers beyond the walls."

Vilmon raised his voice to be heard by all the gathered soldiers of the temple, whose marred and battle-stained armor belied undiminished vitality brought on by tireless faith. He said, "Though the largest groups of skorne have been driven from the city, there is still much work to be done if the region is to be secured. Warder Junia, split your Exemplars into smaller teams. Look for any citizens that require help. Champion Vance, your paladins will assist the Exemplars in aiding the wounded."

Vilmon heard the galloping of hooves followed by a voice as loud and clear as his own. "Ignore that order!"

At the sight of the approaching rider, all knights Exemplar simultaneously stood at attention. Riding toward the group of soldiers was High Exemplar Sarvan Gravus. His steed, Fidelitus, stopped before the crowd with the grace only an expert rider could command.

The high exemplar spoke to the senior warder first, paying no mind to Vilmon, who until a few moments before had been in command of Exemplars and paladins both. "Warder, take your men past the eastern gate and rendezvous with Seneschal Elena Talbot. You will chase the retreating skorne beyond our borders. The fewer left alive, the better."

Each Exemplar placed his fist upon his breast, and then turned in unison to carry out Gravus' will. The high exemplar faced Vilmon, who patiently waited for his notice. "High Paladin Vilmon, please see to your knights and come with me. We are summoned to speak with the intercessor."

Behind him, Vilmon could feel the other paladins bristle at Gravus' discourtesy, but he paid it no mind. He said, "Champion Vance, save as many lives as you can."

"Yes, High Paladin," Vance said, with an emphasis Vilmon had no doubt was for his benefit.

Champion Vance and the remaining paladins headed into the ruined portion of the city, while Vilmon followed the mounted Gravus toward the Holy See at the heart of the capital. Vilmon had a feeling this would be an unpleasant walk.



The distinct smell of smoke and incense permeated the air as the two holy knights headed deeper into the city. Several of the formerly pristine streets were littered with debris. The road Gravus and Vilmon traveled, Penitence Way, was largely empty.

In the distance, the six towers of the Flameguard temple stood tall, their censers blazing proudly in defiance of the invading army. Dwarfing all other buildings, however, was the Sovereign Temple of the One Faith, its enormous red stone edifice a comforting reminder to the populace that the burning heart of Imer remained inviolable.

For their first few minutes together, the pair traveled in silence. Vilmon considered the older knight riding beside him. Sarvan Gravus had been a fierce and loyal warrior of the temple for nearly as long as the paladin had been alive, with service under the last three hierarchs. He was in many ways an irascible and sour-spirited man, one who had been vocally critical of the Order of the Wall in particular, a sentiment only growing stronger as he got older. Yet, anyone who fought beside Gravus knew of his devotion to Menoth and to the vows of his order. He was an Exemplar through and through. His ways were not Vilmon's, but his dedication deserved respect. Vilmon had learned to exercise restraint in the face of the older knight's cynical asides, governing his tongue and temper.

Not only was Gravus one of the most ardent and vocal detractors of the Order of the Wall, he had strong enmity for Vilmon in particular. The paladin could not help but wish for continued silence as they made for their destination.

It did not take long, however, for the high exemplar to speak. "High Paladin," he began, "I understand you came from Sul to aid in the capital's defense?"

"I did," Vilmon said, "Though we only arrived at the battle's end. We worked to prevent the skorne from causing any further damage amid their rout."

"Do not be too hard on yourself, Sir Vilmon," Gravus said, "It is unsurprising you arrived too late. The Order of the Wall is not known for decisiveness or bold action. Had Sul been threatened, I'm sure you would have been quicker to react."

Vilmon allowed the jab to roll off him. After all, Gravus had said worse about him in the past. Indeed, it was not so long ago that the high exemplar had denounced Vilmon at his trial, accusing the paladin of disloyalty and sedition. Vilmon said, "How do things fare with the Northern Crusade? Will you be returning to Leryn soon?"

"I believe that with the hierarch's recent passing and the intercessor's return to Imer, we have hammered the final nail in the coffin for the Northern Crusade," Gravus said.

Vilmon had feared as much. He asked, "Intercessor Kreoss means to end the crusade in Llael?"

"The decision is the Synod's, not the intercessor's," Gravus said. "Still, I believe the current plan is to begin pulling troops as soon as possible, though some will remain. Leryn is valuable. Much has yet to be determined."

"And what of the Harbinger?" Vilmon found himself asking without forethought, though if Gravus heard the emotion in the paladin's voice, he did not let on.

"The Harbinger does as the Harbinger and Menoth will. She is on some mission known only to her. I'm sure she will return when the Creator wills it." With a slight pause, Gravus added, "Should she perish on her pilgrimage, the Testament will safeguard her soul."

Vilmon took a quiet breath to cool his rising temper. For years, it had been his singular honor to act as first among the Harbinger of Menoth's guardians. It had been he who had returned her body to Imer after her death in the Thornwood, there to experience the miracle of resurrection. He could not confront the thought of her facing such a fate again while he was so far away. After the end of the war in Sul and her subsequent journey north, Vilmon had remained in Sul while the city's walls and his own order were rebuilt. Three years passed. Vilmon had often

prayed to Menoth to keep her safe. Although such prayers felt an inadequate replacement for his blade and vigilance, perhaps these supplications offered some protection in his stead.

He knew better than to show any further vulnerability, but was also aware that Gravus had commanded the retinue that accompanied the Harbinger in the northern territories while she sought to spread the faith to foreign lands. He felt compelled to ask, "When last you saw the Harbinger . . . how was she?"

Gravus let the question hang in the air for a long moment. Just as Vilmon thought he was being ignored, the high exemplar replied. "She seemed . . . resplendent."

Before Vilmon could press further, Gravus continued. "Now then, Vilmon, since I have patiently indulged your curiosities, I have several questions for you in turn."

Vilmon braced himself before responding, "Of course. What would you like to know?"

"Based on everything you've seen, who do you believe will be our next hierarch?" Gravus asked.

Vilmon could sense a trap. "Only the Creator knows. Politics are not my strong suit, but as tradition demands, it should be one of the visgoths."

"Indeed," Gravus responded, "But there is no one of them clearly superior to the rest. Visgoths Veshar, Sollers, and Bodalin are all highly respected, and each has a substantial power base. I would not be surprised if Rhoven were to make a bid, being ambitious. Still, there is someone not a visgoth whose influence continues to rise far beyond her station."

"Feora," Vilmon said quietly, more to himself.

"The Priestess of the Flame is increasingly seen as a hero of the theocracy," Gravus said. "If she made a grab for power, she would have tremendous support, even outside the Flameguard. It would be unprecedented for a member of the Incendium to reach such heights, but as a senior priestess she is eligible."

Vilmon knew Feora had been instrumental in protecting the Protectorate's major cities against its enemies. He also knew the priestesses' ambition had put her at odds with other respected leaders, including both Intercessor Kreoss and Hierarch Severius. Vilmon said, "If Feora should try for power, I believe Kreoss must oppose her. It was, if my understanding is correct, why he was made intercessor in the first place."

"This is true. Those two have never gotten along; the Priestess of the Flame's fervor to destroy our enemies is ever at odds with my Grand Exemplar's . . . milder temperament." Gravus said that last as if choosing his words carefully. He continued, "I fear even the authority bestowed on Kreoss as intercessor may not be enough to stop Feora."

"Severius' orders were clear," Vilmon said. "The martial orders are to remain undivided and under his control. Feora is his subordinate. How can she contest this?"

"Ideally, this is true," Gravus said thoughtfully. "But what if Feora challenges that authority? More than half the Synod supported her in her trial. Her people are loyal to her. He may have no choice but to seize ultimate power, if he intends to maintain our unity."

Vilmon was skeptical that Kreoss would ever attempt such a thing. He had always been a devout warrior and a pious champion of the Creator. His rise through the ranks of the Exemplars had

been motivated by a desire to serve the Theocracy. Vilmon knew in his heart Gravus was wrong about Kreoss' motives, but he refused to be baited.

"If you are correct," Vilmon said, "and it was between those two, what would you do?"

Gravus hesitated before responding, clearly weighing a choice that made him uncomfortable. "I am loyal to the leader of my order. But the theocracy is to be led by the clergy. That is the True Law. The Exemplars serve, obey, and fight for the clergy. We do not govern. Furthermore, Kreoss' heart is too soft to lead our nation. As for Feora, I admire the priestess' conviction, but I do not believe she possesses the qualities required of a hierarch. But such hypotheticals do you no favors. It should be a visgoth who is elevated to rule. The Synod grows more and more fractured each day. Infighting between the visgoths worsens. It will only escalate." The high exemplar paused before concluding, "I am sure of one thing: before someone becomes hierarch, there will be chaos and strife, more than our holy nation has seen in a generation."

Vilmon frowned and considered this. He said, "Forgive me, Sir Gravus, but indulge me with one more question. Who do you think should be hierarch?" He was genuinely curious, feeling equal respect and loathing for Gravus' cold assessment.

"Garrick Voyle," Gravus replied without hesitation. Vilmon's stomach turned upon hearing the name. But before he could say anything, the high exemplar moved his horse to block the paladin's path. Gravus' voice was as hard as iron, while the darkening sky of the late afternoon cast long shadows across the mounted knight's form. "I was there, Vilmon, there at the moment that should have been our greatest triumph. Our people stood united, poised to achieve our greatest victory, until you spoke in defiance of our hierarch in a time of war. It was and is unforgivable."

Gravus' words echoed doubts that had weighted on Vilmon's own mind. He could still clearly remember what transpired all those years ago: the bitter fighting in the streets of Sul against the Cygnaran invaders. Vilmon had felt joy on the day the Cygnarans routed and the western wall was reclaimed. Voyle ordered Protectorate forces to follow the retreating Cygnarans across the river.

The fighting had gone well, but his conscience troubled him as they pushed on. He had witnessed when Coleman Stryker stood alone before the entire Protectorate army, making a desperate plea. He promised to release hundreds of Menite prisoners, letting them be seen atop the battlements ahead, in exchange for a brief lull in the violence. It seemed folly to refuse such an offer. It would have cost them little. But Voyle had refused, unwilling to yield even one day to peace. Then came the sound of those women and children screaming in pain and terror after Voyle ordered Feora to fire on the wall and all the helpless Menites who stood atop it.

Without looking Gravus in the eye, Vilmon said, "I could not stand idly and watch the faithful die needlessly."

"Needlessly?" Gravus spat. "Their deaths would have served as an act of sacrifice for the ultimate glory of the Protectorate. We could have conquered Caspia and burned the accursed Morrowan Sancteum to ashes. It was not your place to speak."

"It was wrong," Vilmon said.

Gravus sat atop Fidelitus, his countenance like a judge passing down sentence. He said, "Wrong? The hierarch's word is law. Wrong is putting your own soft-heartedness above the glory of the Lawbringer."

"I am not an Exemplar. My order stands for principles older than the hierarchy."

"Garrick Voyle announced your treachery in front of ally and foe alike." Gravus said, his eyes flaring. "He spoke truth."

Hierarch Voyle declaring him apostate and sentencing him to death was something that had seared a deep scar in Vilmon's memory. He could feel the impact of the hierarch's bladed fist connecting with his chest—a killing blow. The strength Menoth granted to Voyle allowed him to turn warjacks to scrap barehanded, and in that moment his anger had been turned on Vilmon. That punch would have ended his life. He had been prepared for death the moment he had spoken out. He had not attempted to dodge or step aside. It was the cost of his obedience to his code, a final protest.

It was with astonishment, then, when he saw the wound meant for him instead manifest on the body of the Harbinger. He was awed and terrified to witness that miracle. She saw fit to accept the mortal injury on his behalf. The horror of seeing the young woman he had sworn to protect buckling under the blow meant for him was shocking. "I put up no resistance. I was ready to die," Vilmon said at last. He looked Gravus in the eye and added, "I would never have asked her to intervene."

"Yes, but intervene she did," Gravus said. "And some say she followed the Creator's will. That Menoth had commanded her to save you. Perhaps that is true. But there are some of us who wonder if it had less to do with divine mandate and

more to do with a young woman's sentimentality toward her protector."

Vilmon had often wondered the same, but he did not appreciate such disrespect for the Harbinger. He had to move the argument away from her. "I stood trial, Gravus, willing and without protest. You were there. I would have accepted the punishment were I found guilty—"

"But you *were* found guilty," Gravus interjected. "The Synod voted unanimously. Yet, here you stand, keeping not only your life but also your rank and titles."

"Hierarch Severius," the paladin said. "It was his decision to overturn the judgment."

"His Holiness proved an able successor to Hierarch Voyle, but pardoning you was one of his few mistakes. I cannot comprehend what *value* he saw in you or your order after everything you cost us," Gravus said.

"We protect the people," Vilmon said. "And stand the wall. We keep the faithful safe from chaos and destruction. Severius knew this."

"You think your actions kept the people of our nation safe?" Gravus asked in a mocking tone. "The arrogance of the Order of the Wall. You weren't there during the chaos after Hierarch Ravonal's death. The Temple fractured. The Synod broke into factions vying for power. Who do you think suffered during the food shortages and riots?"



Vilmon had been too young to remember, but he had heard the stories about the long years between the reigns of Ravonal and Voyle, when the temple splintered from power bids amid bloody infighting.

"The needless death I saw then would make your soft heart quiver. I had to stand by while ambitious priests used the loyalty of my order for their selfish purposes. Only Garrick Voyle possessed the strength and divine mandate to unify us." The high exemplar turned his gaze from Vilmon to the horizon, where the Sovereign Temple still loomed. "You talk of duty and honor, but what of those who had to shed blood to bring stability? When Garrick Voyle made his final push for hierarch, I rode in his name. I killed for him—Flameguard, knights, even priests—because I believed in the future Voyle would bring to our people. I was proven right."

Vilmon knew Gravus spoke true. It was widely known that as an exemplar seneschal, Sarvan Gravus was instrumental in quelling all opposition to Voyle's rise to power. Rumor had it that at least one visgoth had met his fate at the end of Gravus' flail—Ortun Drask, Garrick Voyle's greatest rival and a formidable priest who had also been thought to embody the very word of Menoth.

"Now, after years of stability and victory against the unfaithful, those days of uncertainty and unrest threaten to return. I fear it will be a great while before anyone worthy rises to unite us again." Gravus let that last hang before adding, "Tell me, paladin, how does it feel to know all the misery ahead of our theocracy can be laid at your feet?"

"I was true to my code. My only desire was to protect those people, Menites every one. They had already suffered during the war for their beliefs," Vilmon said.

"Yes, you managed to save the lives of some few who practiced an inferior and diluted version of our faith. What about the farmers and laborers in Gedorra, Sulonmarch, and Vardhan, who suffered as the war went on?"

Vilmon remained silent.

"Let us be honest, Vilmon—the reasons for your defiance were far from altruistic," Gravus said.

"That is not true."

"You made quite the display of your self-righteous anger, loudly defying our hierarch for all to see. How it must have bolstered your pride to chastise your betters, to hold yourself higher than His Holiness before so many witnesses," Gravus said. "To seek to shatter the faith and conviction of those gathered in his name."

"That wasn't my intent." Vilmon replied. Before he could say more, the high exemplar cut him off.

"You can fool yourself, Vilmon, but all hearts are open to Menoth. His masked eye sees all. Hierarch Voyle removed paladins from honor guards in favor of the perfectly loyal Devout. Yes, machines did your job better. It galled you. He excluded Grand Paladin Bouridor from his war councils. He left your order to languish in favor of the Order of the Fist and the Knights Exemplar. It all must have eaten at you. Do you deny it? Do you deny gaining satisfaction when you rebuked your hierarch as he ordered our crusade to fire upon those walls, the very symbol of your order?"

The two men stared at one another for a long moment, and then the weight of Gravus' words proved too heavy for Vilmon to bear.

Vilmon broke his gaze and with a quiet and unsteady voice said, "And if I were indeed guilty of this, what would you have me do? How would I right this wrong?"

Without hesitation, Gravus replied, "Submit yourself for purification on the wrack. Or if you do not have the courage for that, then head into the desert and never return. The choice is yours."

With that, Gravus turned his horse away from the paladin. "Come, Vilmon, we must still meet with the intercessor. Perhaps you can confess your failings and throw yourself on his mercy. He can see justice done. It is a noble course to volunteer for punishment."

The high paladin silently followed. As he walked, he took in all the fear and death the recent days had brought to the city of Imer, in the wake of Hierarch Severius' death and the skorne siege. Then, his eyes looked toward the east, toward the merciless wind and desolate sand.



Vilmon walked in a daze, his footsteps heavy and emotions warring in his mind. He could not discern how much time had transpired since they began their walk, though the sun had begun to set. Or perhaps it was merely hidden behind the edifice of the Sovereign Temple of the One Faith. In a few short minutes, they would arrive at the foot of the massive set of stairs leading to the Temple's entrance.

Perhaps sensing the effect his words had on the paladin, High Exemplar Gravus seemed more at ease, almost jovial by his stern standards.

"Vilmon, it really is too bad your path did not lead you to become an Exemplar. The more unfortunate aspects of your personality would have been hammered out of you." Gravus paused before adding, "For all your failings, you are a tremendous warrior. How many unbelievers died by your blade the day Sul's western wall was reclaimed? I heard you cleaved in half a Caspian officer holding the rear guard during the retreat. It is reassuring to know you can be ruthless and decisive when your blood is roused."

Vilmon recalled the moment quite differently. Anger had not entered into it, only the knowledge that killing that man was the only way to stop the warjacks under his control. Despite a fierce battle, Vilmon tried to give his foe a swift and merciful end. The paladin began to say something, but ultimately did not respond, which only further lightened the Exemplar's mood.

Gravus said, "You know, Vilmon, I recall the first time I met you. It was just after the siege at Fisherbrook. I saw you standing guard beside the Harbinger as she sermonized to the faithless we had captured in the western side of the city."

Vilmon would not call what the Protectorate forces did to the small town a siege so much as a one-sided devastation.

"I remember you in your unmarred and pristine armor," Gravus continued, "while my knights and I had fought so

fiercely on the eastern side of the town. I remember thinking, 'I am not going to get along with that man.' Now of course, your reputation had preceded you. Grand Exemplar Hurst spoke highly of you and your skill, calling you the best swordsman he had seen. I wonder if he would have still felt that way had he foreseen his ultimate fate, dying at the hands of an eldritch while you rushed to safety."

Vilmon did not have the mental energy to summon the memory of Grand Exemplar Baine Hurst's death at the hands of the Cryxian warcaster called Goshade. Nor did he bother to correct the last false statement—he had left on Hurst's urging in order to bring the Harbinger to safety. This was an old argument. Yet, something about Gravus bringing up Fisherbrook provoked a thought. Some memory long forgotten. "High Exemplar," Vilmon asked, "may I ask you something about Fisherbrook?"

In his present mood, the interruption did not seem to faze him. "Of course."

"During the attack, is it true that you were tasked with preventing anyone from the militia from leaving town in search of aid?" Vilmon asked.

"That is correct. No one was to leave lest they reach Stonebridge Castle; otherwise our plans for traveling farther north would have been put in jeopardy."

"I remember that," said Vilmon. "In order to achieve your objective, you ordered your men to slaughter the wives and children of the militia soldiers."

"That's right," Gravus said without a hint of remorse. "It was the simplest way to keep the soldiers from running. They stayed and fought to protect their loved ones."

The comment incensed him, but Vilmon used all his discipline to contain his emotions. He continued, "I see. I know that Severius led the attack. Did he specifically order you to kill those people?"

Gravus paused and then said, "I did my duty."

"I do not doubt that, High Exemplar. But my question is simple. Whose idea was it to kill the civilians?"

"Mine," Gravus said. "I executed my orders in the most expedient and effective fashion."

"And at any point, had you considered any other strategy to fulfill your mission? Perhaps a blockade, or dispatching cavalry to capture those who fled?" Vilmon asked.

"An inadequate solution given the timeframe. Riding down each militiaman left the possibility that one might escape," Gravus said.

As they neared the Sovereign Temple, Dartan Vilmon had an epiphany. Years ago, on the last day he had seen the Harbinger, she had spoken to him. She had said, "Blind devotion can make one strong, but belief tempered by compassion makes faith unassailable." It was not until that moment, walking next to the High Exemplar, that Vilmon truly found the deeper meaning in her words.

New strength stirred in Vilmon's heart. "One last question, High Exemplar Gravus. If Hierarch Voyle still lived, and he ordered you to wipe out one of our cities for the stability of our nation, would you do it?"

Gravus stopped his horse short and took a moment to ponder the question. Eventually he said, "For the sake of the Protectorate, I would raze Imer to the ground."

That was all Vilmon needed to hear. He said, "Regarding your earlier recommendation, Sir Gravus, I will not be seeking purification upon the wrack."

"Oh? Unfortunate," Gravus responded. "Such cleansing would lighten your soul."

"I do believe you were correct about one thing. I have carried the weight of Hierarch Voyle's death in my heart for a long time. Perhaps there *was* some vanity behind my actions, and if so, I must make penance," Vilmon said. "I will do so by spending the remaining days my Creator grants me protecting innocent people from men like you."

With a heavy sigh, Gravus dismounted. He said, "I am saddened that my words failed to reach you. For a moment I believed you might do the right thing. But in the end, you remain a coward."

"This conversation has reached me. My eyes are opened to many truths. Truths dwelling in my heart as well as your own."

Both men had started walking side-by-side, facing toward the nearing entrance to the Sovereign Temple. But Gravus turned to face Vilmon as soon as the high paladin spoke. He asked with a sneer, "And what does the wise high paladin claim to know about my heart?"

"We are Menoth's creations, all men and women are born with a spark of both his wrath and his mercy," Vilmon said. "At one time, even you must have known grief at the sight of innocents slaughtered. Your code as an Exemplar allowed for nothing but absolute loyalty, yet that same code forced you to inflict horrors on untold innocents. All that death leaves an indelible mark on a man's soul. That mark left you pitiless. It blinded you."

Gravus' face hardened once more. His voice became a low growl. "Tread carefully."

"I know what it's like to kill, Gravus. But I have a line, a code—I only kill when I must. I do not kill the unarmed. I have often wondered what it is like for those who have no such code, who take lives indiscriminately. Who hide behind orders. Did you begin to enjoy the violence? Did you give in to those dark impulses at Fisherbrook, Gravus?"

"Shut your mouth, paladin." Gravus' voice was barely audible, but his eyes flashed with anger. The tightening of the high exemplar's fist caused the leather grip of his weapon to creak. "You have your code. I have mine. Yours is an excuse. Mine requires fortitude."

Vilmon would not relent. "Since you advised me on how to correct my past mistakes, allow me to do the same. Perhaps in your advanced age, it is not your body, but your mind, that is failing. Retire from your order and spend the rest of your days at a monastery; perhaps quiet reflection on the Canon of the True Law will silence the innocent women and children whose screams invade your dreams."

"Bastard," roared Gravus, his eyes flaring with an inner fire. His weapon was in hand.

In an instant, the full weight of the high exemplar's four-headed flail slammed into Vilmon's chest. The impact rattled him and the pain made it hard to breathe; yet, he still stood. Before Gravus swung his weapon again, Vilmon drew his great sword.

He stepped forward to prevent Gravus' blow from striking him. The older man instead smashed a gauntleted fist at Vilmon's face. The paladin accepted the punch without flinching. He had a different goal in mind. With a swift blow of his pommel, Vilmon struck the high exemplar's wrist, numbing the arm and causing Gravus to drop his weapon even as the older knight's momentum took him past, struggling to keep his balance.

Before Gravus could recover, Vilmon used the flat of his blade to flick the weapon from the cobblestones up into his right hand. The paladin now held the exemplar's flail—Reverence, he believed it was called. A difficult and dangerous weapon to wield properly, one Vilmon would never have chosen.

The paladin turned and calmly said, "I believe you dropped this, Sir Gra—"

The world exploded in a flash of white as Vilmon felt Gravus' armored fist connect with the side of his face again. This time, Vilmon tasted blood. As he regained his bearings, he realized Gravus held his right forearm in one hand while the other clasped Censure by the blade. Vilmon's arms felt locked in the high exemplar's grip. As blood trickled from Gravus' clenched hand down the sword's edge, Vilmon marveled at the strength his opponent's anger provided him.

"You are an enemy of the Temple," Gravus snarled, "I will not let you destroy all we have built." Looking into the other man's eyes, Vilmon realized that for all their differences, both shared one thing in common: a conviction that ran into the very core of their being. There would be no convincing Gravus on the error of his ways. Gravus would always be the man he was. The only language men like him could understand was force.

And so, as it had been countless times throughout Vilmon's life, the Lawbringer showed him an opening. He could clearly see it. With a turn of his waist and a motion of his wrist, he would remove the fingers from Gravus' right hand. If his opponent would not relent, he would smash the pommel of his sword across the bridge of the other man's nose. In his mind's eye, Vilmon could see dozens of moves and countermoves. While he would try to incapacitate the high exemplar, in his heart, Vilmon knew Gravus might not stop until one of them lost his life. If all else failed, Vilmon saw the maneuver that would ultimately end it all, a quick feint ending in a horizontal slash across Gravus' throat. He was the more skilled warrior, and he had youth on his side. The Exemplar would lose.

Just as Vilmon took a breath to steel himself for this grim work, Gravus' demeanor changed. The rage on his face vanished as he let go of Vilmon. Behind him, the paladin heard a small voice. "Excuse me, High Paladin, High Exemplar?"

Vilmon turned to see an acolyte at the foot of the stairs of the Sovereign Temple. Vilmon wondered when he had arrived. At some point, several Knights Exemplar and Temple

Flameguard had also gathered to watch the sudden duel. They stood tensely and silently gripping their weapons as both high-ranking knights stood a heartbeat from murder.

The acolyte nervously spoke, "The intercessor awaits."

Both men shared a long look. Then, Vilmon turned to Gravus and extended his flail, grip first, toward him. "Duty calls."

Gravus took back his weapon, and as he walked passed Vilmon, he said, "This is not over, boy."

"I believe it is," Vilmon replied. In Gravus' eye, he thought he saw recognition of how close the older man had come to his own death. He lived by Vilmon's restraint and by the intercession of duty.

As both knights made their way up the Temple steps, Dartan Vilmon felt a lightness he had not experienced in years. Finally, he knew why the Harbinger had left him behind. Not because he was unworthy to protect her, but because she had foreseen what the paladin must do for the people of his nation and his faith.

Regardless of which earthly priest led the theocracy, war and crusade would be an intrinsic part of the Protectorate's future. And while there would always be those faithful men and women willing to take up arms in service of their Creator, there must also be some who act as shields for those incapable or unwilling to fight. Perhaps it was time for the Paladins of the Order of the Wall reminded the other martial orders why they had endured since the dawn of civilization. There were others willing to do what was right, including among the clergy. As the sun set on the city of Imer, High Paladin Dartan Vilmon could feel a new fire burning within him, a certainty of purpose he had missed without knowing it was gone.

