

The Hearth at Winter's Heart

Prologue: The Steward

The echoing of the horses' hooves on the stone bricks of the courtyard was interrupted by the dull thud of the gate closing behind him. A sense of foreboding always descended upon Harold Inkly when the frosts came, and this year was no different. However, as always, he occupied his mind with numbers and calculations. There would be time for sulking when the gates were closed, and the hearths were lit and the long winter months stretched out in front of them.

And they would be long months. He and Lord Heaton needed scarcely have bothered with their horses this year. The pale blue crystal embedded in the cliff face at the far end of the castle had begun to pulse, as it did every year and the fingers of frost had begun to stretch out from it and would continue to do so until they grasped the entire continent in their grip. Soon would come the cloud and the snow and it would be his job to ensure their supplies were sufficient to last them through the winter. But that wasn't first on the priority list.

Every winter he and the lord of the castle would ride forth the day after the heart begun to beat and see how far the frost had made it. The further it had made it, the "faster" the winter would be. A fast winter was dangerous in its own right, it could catch the settlements to the far west or south off guard and cause problems, but it would recede fast as well. Harold prayed for a fast winter all throughout the summer, but those prayers were rarely answered.

This winter was going to be a slow one, and that was bad news for the people who lived at Castle Eisguard, the castle built to stand watch over the Heart of Winter and to warn the rest of the continent when it arrived.

Harold dismounted and immediately made his way over to the Raven's Tower. As the name suggested, the tower was used for keeping the ravens of the castle who would carry the messages to every kingdom and city on the continent, informing them of winter's arrival.

He could do the maths of figuring out how long the winter would last in his head after so long but would always make sure to do things properly with paper and an abacus before he sent out the letters. There was no room for mistakes.

The winter advanced and receded at the same rate so if it had made it one one hundredth of its way across the continent in one day it would take one hundred days to reach its apex and one hundred to get back. The calculation was rarely that straight forward.

The slower the winter the more time the western and southern areas, on the far side of Havnyr from the Heart of Winter, would have to prepare but the longer the people of Eisguard would have to endure. A slow winter like this one would mean hard choices about how to distribute the supplies between the castle and the village a couple miles below.

Chapter 1: The Elder

The fact that the frost hadn't gone all the way through the village in the first night was a very bad sign. Long winters meant that Lord Heaton would demand more supplies to keep himself and his people fed and that would cause problems for the village who would not only have to deal with a long winter but with limited supplies due to the "commandeering" of what they had.

Harriet personally felt like "coercion" would be a more appropriate term. It was always the youngest and the oldest that died first in a long winter. And, in winter, as the ground is too hard to dig in and the blankets too important to waste the bodies are simply left in a corner of each house.

And it was always in the dark winter months that the whispering started. There could not be another year like this; The Lord has gone too far this time; We will not stand for it again.

At one time, she had viewed it as her responsibility to quell these dissenters. They were the people of Eisguard and it was their sworn duty to supply the castle with what it needed through the winter. She had tried to keep the peace, but it had gone too far.

She always saw the dead after a long winter, she stood by the side of the priest who delivered the eulogy once the ground was soft enough to dig graves. She looked at the faces of the dead and told herself it had to be done.

Normally, when the sun came back and the grass grew again, the whispering died down. But it hadn't this year. Last winter had been one of the worst ever and Lord Heaton had made sure of it. They'd lost close to a quarter of their people that winter. Infants and Elderly had died first as they so often did, but it had gotten worse. People had died from starvation and from running out of firewood. The cold would always claim a few but this was different. They had had the supplies to make it through, and they had been taken from them.

She had expected arrests when the Commander of the Castle Guards, Badger, had come down to speak to her. Her fears seemed confirmed when he said he was aware of the whisperings, the plan. But she had not expected what he'd said next.

Chapter 2: The Commander

Badger was not Thomas Badger's real surname. This was because Thomas did not have a "real" surname. He'd been born a peasant and an orphan at that and had earned the nickname due to odd black and white colours of his hair. At first, it had been an insult the other kids had thrown at him, but it had lost its sting as he'd gotten older. The time he'd spent soldiering and working under lords has taught him that fancy people had family names and crests and titles. He'd had to work on the title, but the surname and crest had been easy to figure out.

More years of soldiering and guard work had gotten him noticed and assigned to this position, guarding the most miserable place in the world. So now he was Commander Thomas Badger, a name that still produced smirks sometimes when he introduced himself, but it was as good a name as any as far as he was concerned. As far as animals to be named after went, it was probably not the most impressive. He'd met Lions and Bears and Dragons, but Badger meant him.

Thomas watched the ravens fly from the tower, that meant it was time for the Lord and Steward to start discussing what supplies they'd need for the winter, they'd be having that conversation up in The Lord's chamber. In previous winters he'd waited in the courtyard to be told what they were collecting before heading down to the village with his men, but this time he needed to talk to the Lord and Steward in private.

"Sargeant Orlois, head down to the barracks and get everyone up and ready to move within the hour. I'm headin up for a chat with the Lord. Also, I want cloaks and gloves, winter is here and I'm not having anyone losing any fingers to frostbite this early in the year!"

"Yes Sir"

Thomas made his way across the courtyard up to the keep. This building was the biggest in the castle and was made with the purpose of being where the castles inhabitants went during the worst of winter. Up here in the mountains the snows fell as deep as ten feet. The Castle gates and sally ports would be totally unusable and even if the snow was deep enough to jump from the walls safely it, one would be stuck in a whiteout for miles around fighting through snow that was probably taller than they were.

The prospect of running out of food terrified everyone in the castle, and that drove them to levy the village harshly to make sure it never happened. But the harsh winters recently had driven them to go too far, the village was suffering. Too many dead every year and he knew that they didn't all need to be.

The brutally honest truth was that they treated the villagers as expendable because, according to the grand scheme of things, they were. The castle existed to keep watch on the Heart of Winter. The village existed to supply the castle. If the village lost a few infants and old people every year, that didn't matter to the continent as a whole. But it did matter to Thomas Badger, who'd been a peasant himself.

Thomas climbed the stairs until he reached Lord Heaton's chambers and knocked on the door, the sound of voices within dimmed slightly before Heaton's voice called "Enter".

Chapter 3: The Guardsman

Benny fastened the cloak around his shoulders but left the hood down. It may have technically been winter now but was not cold enough yet that the layers of padded gambeson, followed by chainmail, followed by surcoat and helmet weren't plenty warm enough. The cloak he kept thrown back, though he knew he'd be pulling it tightly around himself before too long.

Picking up the shield as well he headed out to the courtyard, not grabbing a spear though.

Benny knew the drill, swords and armour and shields here weren't due to an expectation of violence, more so due to the need to project power. There were forty-five guards that made up the castle's garrison, not including the Commander. They worked in shifts of fifteen most days, but today thirty of them would be heading down to the village. They would be taking from those people, for the greater good of course, but that could stoke some resentment. A small number of men or if they weren't visibly armed and capable of defending themselves, that resentment could quickly boil over. Sometimes a willingness for violence was the only way to keep the peace.

Orlois was the Sergeant of his shift, the unofficial second in command, and had been put in charge of preparing everyone to go. Most of the faces in the courtyard looked tired and a bit grumpy. Benny would normally have been awake right now, on his break shift, but the others had been woken up from the barracks for this and weren't happy about it.

Once the rest of the guys from the barracks were back from the Armoury, equipped and uniformed, they were ready to go.

"Alright everyone, stand easy until we get back. Just going to go see what the hold-up is with the Commander, Benny, with me!"

Benny followed as smartly as he could, trying not to betray the slight excitement he felt. He was going to go upstairs to the Lord's study, he'd

never actually spoken to the Lord before directly and the thought of it gave him butterflies.

“Leave that shield boy, you’ll knock stuff over carrying that thing around in there”.

Benny left it leaning against the wall and followed Orlois up the stairs to the Lord’s Chamber.

Orlois raised her fist to knock but paused at the sound of raised voices inside. Benny looked at her, but she said nothing, clearly considering what they should do here. Was someone in danger? Would they be intruding on something they shouldn’t?

“I WILL NOT JEPORDISE THE SAFETY OF-”

“BUT YOU WILL, YOU ARE, YOU HAVE! DON’T YOU UNDERSTA-”

“I UNDERSTAND THAT I HAVE GIVEN YOU AN ORDER”

“I’M TRYING TO HELP Y-”

There was a thud and a clattering sound and Orlois decided that action had to be taken. She turned the doorhandle and stepped inside, Benny followed. The Commander had blood on his face from where he’d been hit and was standing by some shelves that he’d stumbled back into. However, he was upright and didn’t seem seriously hurt.

Lord Heaton was red in the face with fury, but The Commander didn’t seem intimidated. Benny, on the other hand, was terrified.

The Commander walked steadily back to the desk and rested his hands on it. Neither of them acknowledged the arrival of the others, Orlois was once again frozen though Benny was pretty sure she wore her shock at the scene before her better than he did. She looked focused and deep in thought, Benny couldn’t get his mouth to close.

Lord Heaton spoke with a dangerous quietness, as if his rage had become so loud it’d circled back around to a whisper, “Are you disobeying my orders Commander?”

“Yes” The Commander answered, his voice steady and decisive.

Lord Heaton's hand went for his sword but there was a flash as The Commander's knife cleared its sheath. A bellow of pain and rage erupted from the far side of the table as Lord Heaton's hand was pinned to the wood.

There was a long silence where only Lord Heaton's breathing, made ragged and rapid through pain and rage could be heard.

The Commander was the first to speak, "Sergeant Orlois, Benny, please relieve Lord Heaton of his weapons and take him down to the cells".

Chapter 4: The Commander

It was probably only a few seconds, but they felt like days. Orlois looked intensely troubled, Benny shocked and terrified. Thomas knew he would have to address the order to them by name or they would likely just freeze. It looked like they might anyway.

During that moment, the steward who had spent the confrontation cowering in a corner let out a whimper, Thomas ignored him.

He resisted the urge to repeat the order, to remind them of his authority. They would comply or they wouldn't, the dice was rolled and there was no re-rolling it.

Just when Thomas thought that they were going to refuse, Orlois seemed to reach the end of her calculation and stepped forward, quickly removing Lord Heaton's sword belt from him and checking him for other weapons. Benny moved forward as well, doing the same on the other side. He found a dagger in Heaton's boot which he set on the table, Thomas grabbed it before Heaton got any ideas.

Orlois had regained her composure now that the decision was made but Benny still had the appearance of a startled fish. However, the two finished searching him and Thomas removed the knife. Orlois moved quickly with the medical kit the guards all carried, stemming the blood flow and making sure the wound was covered from any dirt or dust that might get into it.

"Please take Lord Heaton down to the cells, ideally one of the nicer ones".

The cells in Castle Eisguard weren't too bad by castle dungeon standards. The castle's builders realised that they may be needed simply for people who went a bit crazy in winter's long isolation and so some were set aside for non-punitive confinement.

The Commander then picked up the Steward and put him on his feet. He didn't fully trust the man, but he was also the only person with the knowledge to work all this out.

He made his way downstairs and out to the courtyard where the other guardsmen were waiting.

"Alright everyone, change of plans. We're doing this quick, quiet, and with NO bloodshed..."

He then gave the orders to the guards to split up and arrest certain groups and certain people from the castle that he expected to cause trouble. Those especially loyal or especially troublesome. He'd had the list in his head since he'd spoken to the village Elder a few months back but refused to ever write it down or make it official. He hadn't wanted to admit it would be needed.

An hour later, it was over and all the prisoners had been gathered. The Commander walked down to the cells with Orlois and another following behind him.

"Excuse me everyone", he said in what he hoped sounded like a friendly voice.

"YOU FUCKING TRAITOR BADGER" hissed Heaton from the cell closest, Thomas elected to ignore him.

"I'm sorry to have had to confine you all, but I would like to make it clear that none of you are going to be hurt, nor are you going to be expected to remain in these cells for the rest of winter.

"Here's what is going to happen, I am taking control of the supply levying for the winter stockpiles to ensure a fair distribution between the castle and the village. That is all. Once that is done, you will all be free to resume your duties as you see fit, including you, Lord Heaton."

“You’ll have to resume yours with no head, traitor” Heaton said again.

Thomas ignored him again.

“Once again, I am verry sorry for all this, I attempted to resolve it without the need for any of this unpleasantness, but Lord Heaton forced my hand. I will be back to speak with you all soon.”

Chapter 5: The Elder

Badger came down from the castle with his usual group of soldiers but took Elder Harriet aside before anything else.

“It is done, Lord Heaton is in a cell, I am in control.”

What would happen next would be tricky. Normally, The Steward and Lord Heaton would oversee the collection, but Lord Heaton was in a cell and neither Harriet nor Badger trusted The Steward to do it alone. So, Badger brought in The Village Priest and Harriet into the process to keep an eye on things and “help” the Steward recognise the needs of the village.

The guards seemed on edge, which wasn’t particularly surprising given the circumstances, Badger was keeping a close eye on things. Right now, the supplies were the most important thing to keep them all alive, and Harriet appreciated the risk he was taking by staying here to look after them instead of keeping control of the castle.

If things went badly up there it could cause big problems, but the castle meant nothing without the supplies from the village. Badger was probably thinking the same.

As much as she’d had a hard time believing he was really their side initially, she liked him and she hoped his plan worked out. If it didn’t, she probably wouldn’t get the chance to tell him she appreciated it. However, things were going surprisingly well so far, and if they kept this way, the original plan may not be necessary.

She hoped it wouldn’t be.

Chapter 6: The Guardsman

He’d arrested Lord Hector.

Him.

He'd done that.

He'd searched him for weapons and cuffed his hands after Orlois had finished attending to his injured hands.

He'd escorted him to the cells.

He'd done that.

Him.

He'd thrown up afterwards, when nobody was looking.

Benny walked across the courtyard; he was on guard duty in the dungeons. Because he had been one of the guards that had arrested Lord Heaton, Commander Badger seemed to assume that he could be trusted with watching him in the cells. If The Commander hadn't had so much on his mind, he might've given the assignment in person and thought better of it given Benny's state.

But he hadn't and now Benny had his assignment. He was not looking forward to it.

There was a fire burning in dungeons, it was already getting cold and the people in there were staying close to the bars for warmth.

"You" a voice said, quiet and dangerous in the cold air.

"Uhhh, Hello m'lord" Benny said, trying not to let his voice shake, "Have you got everything y'need in there?"

"I have had my castle taken from me, the whole continent is at risk so long as I remain in here. Do you really think Badger will release me now he has claimed power?"

"The C-c-commander j-just wants to make sure that the village gets enough---"

"Do you really believe that? He's played you for a fool, kid. I know it's not your fault, it was a split-second decision, you just went along with the commander, and that another guard."

“I didn’t... I didn’t know what to do”

“I know, it’s not your fault. But you have a chance, now, to make things right. To return to the castle its true ruler”

“What must I do?”

Chapter 7: The Commander

If there was one thing Badger had learned during this coup, it was that logistics was extremely tedious. How much grain did one person need for one month? How many pigs and cows could be kept inside? How many before they started costing more in food and firewood than they were providing? How long until he could go get some sleep?

The discussions were endless but at least they were fairly constructive. The Steward had mostly overcome his terror at the whole order of his life being overturned and was working with Elder Harriet and the village priest quite well. There were disagreements but it seemed to be working out to a point that everyone could be, if not happy, then alive at the end of winter.

Since things were progressing well down here, it was probably about time he headed back up to the castle however that presented a logistical issue too. After the arrest of Lord Heaton, he’d decided to only bring one shift’s worth of men, fifteen, down to the village as additional hands to help carry stuff, and they’d not brought full weaponry. The idea was that he wanted it to be clear that this year was different, that he wasn’t forcing anybody to give anything at the tip of a sword.

This had worked out pretty well, as the whole process had been going smoothly but it now presented an issue. The castle was under control of Orlois with 30 men under her command, but the situation was fragile and as much as he trusted her, approaching the castle alone was a big risk when most of the guard’s loyalties were stretched thin. However, he couldn’t really take his fifteen with him up to the castle as they were needed here.

For the time being, it seemed, he would have to wait until arrangements were complete here, then head back up with his full compliment. If things

had gone wrong, he had the supplies, and the castle didn't have many options without them.

There were hurried footsteps coming up the main street. Thomas turned to see Orlois running towards him and by the look of her she'd been sprinting the entire way from the castle.

"Lord Heaton is out! They set him free; He's retaken the castle!" She was struggling to breathe from exhaustion as she came to a stop in front of him. "Most of the guards switched sides as soon as they saw him, the others switched at sword point. By the time I realised what was going on it was too late"

Thomas' mind, previously dulled and tired by the long boring work of logistics woke up with a start as he considered what he needed to do.

Himself, Orlois, and fifteen men against Lord Heaton and his thirty. They would have gone straight to the armoury, his men had shields and swords but those coming would have Crossbows and spears and halberds.

"Okay I want you to go find Elder Harriet and hide her somewhere safe. Stay there with her and get her out if you have to. She must survive this for the sake of the other villagers."

Thomas was thinking. Most of the soldiers involved weren't particularly loyal to him or to Lord Heaton, they had gone along with him when it was him giving the orders and now it was Heaton they were following him as well. They also probably wouldn't want to attack him really, and he was pretty sure he could call them off even if Lord Heaton tried to order them to.

So, it would come down to who could convince them that they were in charge, whilst really it was the guards themselves that held all the power to decide.

Chapter 8: The Guardsman

They'd gone to the armoury first. Lord Heaton had stridden in the front confident and calm straight across the courtyard into the armoury. There he and the others freed from the cells had armed and armoured

themselves. Next, they'd marched forth. The castle had a few strongpoints that needed to be controlled. Towers, the gatehouse, and the Keep were the main ones and had the most guards. As soon as many of the guards saw Lord Heaton approaching, they immediately swore they'd always been loyal.

It might have had something to do with the loaded and drawn crossbow in Heaton's hands. His right hand was too badly wounded to effectively wield a sword so he'd taken a weapon that he could use without much dexterity. Once it was loaded and ready, all he had to do was point and pull the trigger. Which Benny suspected each of the guards they encountered was fearfully aware of.

Heaton had initially considered heading straight to the Commander's office but when he'd learned that he was down in the village, decided not to. Orlois was loyal to Badger and likely to cause trouble, but she didn't have enough influence over the others to pose a serious threat. By the time they reached the Commander's office, it was empty and Orlois was nowhere in the castle.

Heaton gathered all the guards and his fellow armed prisoners in the courtyard. He asked who had been manning the gate house and allowed Orlois to escape. Benny thought for a moment he might shoot the two that sheepishly confessed, but he had them thrown in the dungeons, before turning to address the others.

"The traitor has taken refuge in the village where he hordes the supplies we will need to get through the winter! We'll go down there, reclaim what's ours, and punish those that conspired to starve us in the cold!"

He wasn't greeted with much enthusiasm but if it bothered him, it didn't show. Lord Heaton ordered the gates opened and they marched through, down to the village.

Chapter 9: The Elder

She heard the approaching group before she saw them. Commander Badger and his remaining soldiers stood in a loose formation down by the supplies. The threat was obvious, "Do anything stupid, and we all starve".

Harriet was pretty sure this was a bluff; Badger hadn't spent all this effort and risk to avoid bloodshed to kill them all now. But she hoped Lord Heaton would be fooled.

Orlois was next to her, she'd never spoken to the woman before today, though she'd seen her before. She looked anxious, though not in a scared kind of way. More like she wished more than anything she was down there with them, not up here watching. Harriet could see why Badger had put here up here though, he trusted that she would do her job no matter how much she wanted to be somewhere else.

Badger was speaking now, "I see Lord Heaton has left his cell in the Dungeons, very good of you men to recapture him so quickly and bring him to me"

"Very funny Badger" Heaton made the Commander's name sound like an insult, "But this game is over. Pretending you're in charge won't help you anymore."

"I'm not pretending, these are my men and they have you completely surrounded, drop your weapon and come back up to the castle with me"

Heaton laughed, but even from up here she could see the discomfort in his stance. The soldiers behind him were shifting uncomfortably and even though Heaton couldn't see them he could likely feel the tension.

"I'm giving you one last warning traitor," Heaton said, his voice loud and clear, "To surrender. I promise you will be given a fair trial"

"I never wanted it to come to this Heaton" Badger said, his voice still carrying the commanding presence, but an unmistakeable sadness to it as well.

"Me neither" said Heaton as he raised the crossbow and shot The Commander in the head.

Chapter 10: The Guardsman

Benny staggered as if it was him that had just been shot. There was no air in his lungs, he couldn't breathe. He'd just shot him, right there. There hadn't even been time to react, The Commander hadn't even had time to look

surprised before the bolt hit him in the forehead. He couldn't look at the body, he knew it would be too much.

Lord Heaton was speaking but Benny couldn't hear him. The guards who'd been behind The Commander had raised their hands in surrender. It was over.

Elder Harriet emerged from a nearby building. She was alone and insisted that she hadn't been involved in the plot but had gone along with it due to fear of retribution if she refused. That she and the other villagers were loyal and peaceful and wanted nothing more than to fulfil their role as the providers for castle Eisguard.

Lord Heaton ordered her arrested, and once she was in chains stood her next to Benny.

"Make sure she watches" Lord Heaton said, a kind of triumphant malice in his voice "men, the traitor prevented us from gathering our required supplies for the winter. What remains here, is insufficient! Search every house, and make sure we get what is needed!"

Benny watched numbly as those who had followed The Commander and those who had followed Lord Heaton together set about looting the village. Doors were torn off hinges and those who resist were beaten. Heaton stopped them short of killing anyone for what good that did. But most of the houses in the village were ransacked.

The Commander's body was left where it lay.

By the time they returned to the castle, Benny had stopped shaking. The fear and shock had gone to be replaced by nothing. Just an emptiness. Lord Heaton clapped him on the shoulder back in the courtyard and said something about loyalty and decisive action. He then pinned a broach on Benny's surcoat and called him "Commander".

Benny wasn't sure he really understood what was going on. The words made sense but added together they just had no meaning. He nodded and tried to smile and hoped Lord Heaton would leave him alone soon.

Benny watched as the other guards went back to their posts or the barracks, he watched a couple of them escorting Elder Harriet down to the dungeon. Once they were gone, he was alone.

Chapter 11: The Elder

The new commander of the guards sat on the floor outside her cell. He certainly didn't cut quite as impressive an image as Badger had done in the role.

"I never meant for this to happen" he said, once he'd done telling her what he'd done.

"Believe it or not, neither did I" she said with a sad smile. When he'd first arrived down here, she'd thought it was time for her to hang. A walk down to the village and a painful end. They'd probably leave her there over the whole winter. But it was already evening judging by the orange light coming through her small window, and the Captain of the Guards was alone. "If you're about to say "sorry" then I don't think that quite cover it".

"I know it doesn't" he said. For a moment she thought he was going to start crying again, but he didn't. "I got the Commander killed, and now those of your people who don't starve are going to suffer even more"

"Don't be so sure" she said, a more genuine smile touching her lips this time.

"What do you mean?"

"You know, I managed to get Orlois out safely. She wanted to try to avenge her friend, but I told her what was going to happen, and she agreed to help. To live to fight another day. We have our ways of keeping things hidden from you. It'll be a harsh winter, but most of them will survive. And when the thaw comes, they'll be free."

"I don't understand"

"Badger was a good man," she said "He didn't want violence, he didn't want people to die. He thought that Lord Heaton could be reasoned with, or at least that he could manage the situation even if he couldn't. Kindness cost him his life. His whole plan was trying to save them, to save you all."

“Save us from what?”

“My plan”

Epilogue: The Steward

Harold hadn't seen the Commander of the guards all day and he needed to find him. The snow had almost reached its apex, the gates and sally ports were all unusable now until the thaw came, he estimated that would come in approximately five months' time and probably another few weeks before things were thawed out enough for the castle to go back to its non-winter operation.

The snow would keep falling in that time and that meant that the courtyard needed to be kept clear and the guards, since there was little to worry about in the law-and-order department during winter, were the ones who did the bulk of the work on that.

Benny was new to the position of Commander and would likely need help with shifting the rotors from the start of winter phase over to the main winter phase. Harold didn't let himself think about the old Commander who'd been so good at it.

With the air of the sky white with snow and cloud, Harold almost didn't notice the smoke rising from the cellar. The cellar where the supplies were kept.

He ran over as fast as the ice would allow, calling for help and prying the doors open. He was met with a wall of flames, the whole cellar an inferno, and their winter supplies were the fuel.

It was already too late.

Four months left of winter, another few weeks before they could leave the castle, even longer before they could realistically be resupplied. He would need to write a letter and send a raven. It probably wouldn't make it through the snow, but it was his duty to try.

Harold didn't bother calling for help again. He watched the flames and enjoyed the warmth they brought whilst it lasted. The cold that followed was going to last a lot longer.