



*From Abbot Martin, of the monastery of Saint Samuel on the Isle of Markew, to his Holiness Pope Benedict.*

*Your holiness, please grant he who bears this message your ear and courtesy. Though recently a believer in the false gods of the northmen, he has proven his faith in the forge of the Lord, and I pray that he has reached you with good speed.*

*I write of terrible tidings, of which the bearer was witness and survivor. It began on the fourth week past Easter in the year of our Lord one thousand thirty and three...*

▼ **ONE MONTH EARLIER** - Brother John called from the watchtower, "Sail! Northmen!", and began tolling the warning bell. Below, the monks of Saint Samuel's gathered their tools and their work, and hurried towards the gates of the monastery. Flocks were driven inside the walls, and all things of value collected lest they be lost. Those tending flocks in the far fields sought refuge as best they could. There were many places to remain unseen, and the flocks could be regathered.

It was not the first time the Northmen had arrived here to pillage and plunder. Though most of that people had been farmers and traders for generations, there were still isolated settlements who followed the old ways, or went back to them when times got hard. The main hall still bore scorch marks on the walls, and the mounds of earth in the cemetery had not yet sunk level with the soil of those who had passed on more quietly in the service of the Lord.

Now, the walls were a little higher, the gate a bit stronger. Piles of rocks waited on the walkways, staves now had iron sheathing, and pruning hooks were perhaps a bit larger than they used to be. The Northmen, knowing that the valuable plunder was gone, often simply sailed by, no doubt to find richer and easier places to land. At times, they simply made landfall near dusk, tore down outbuildings for a fire, and left in the morning.

## Dark Millennium

Abbot Martin prayed that this would be one of those times. The three years he had been here had been trying. The herders and fishers who once lived here had vanished when the Northmen came the last time, preferring a new life on the mainland, where at least there was somewhere to run. Without the community to serve and guide, the monastery had less reason to be, and life was harder. The monks spent more of their time in labor and less in quiet contemplation, using the solitude to hone their souls and copy Scriptures so that the new churches in the west and north might have their own holy writ.

They survived, rounding up and tending the sheep and fowl that had escaped the islanders in their hurried exodus, and fishing from the shore. Gardens provided bounty in season, and there was no shortage of stone for making the walls higher and stronger. Martin was loathe to turn plowshares into swords, but it was no sin to make a tool stronger than it needed to be. And if it was a sin of waste to make a heavier tool than needed, it was expiated in the harder work required to use it.

He looked down from the walls as the northern ship beached in one of the few spots it could, a gravel beach some distance off. The *knarr* was of origins uncertain, planking damaged, sails thin and even holed, the northmen an unlikely group of warriors, so poorly armed and armored it was obvious to his aging and untrained eye. Their ship they barely pulled upon the beach, its stern still bobbing slightly on the waves. As two groups, one afore the other, they advanced upon the gate of Saint Samuel's.

The fore group stopped, perhaps outside the distance a strong monk could throw a fist-sized rock from the walls. Martin smiled, then checked his pride. The leader of the Northmen unbuckled his sword and handed it to another, then removed his helm to bare his head and walked without hesitation to the gate. Brothers to either side had rocks in hand, but Martin gestured them to hold. The northman surprised him. He went to one knee, and in a thick and atrocious Latin, looked up and shouted "Sanctum! Sanctum!".

What manner of Northman would give up his sword, go to bended knee before a Christian and beg for sanctuary? *Perhaps one hoping to get himself and his men inside the walls.* Patience was a virtue, and of that virtue, Abbot Martin had a goodly sum. *He waited.* The Northman stood after a short space, and said something to his men that Martin could not understand. Another figure from the fore group advanced, this one in the remnants of vestments, and a growth of beard and stubbled tonsure that did not quite mask the look of a priest too far and too long from a razor. He was a young man, thin, pale and shaking, and not just from the wind. His left arm was in a sling made from a tattered maniple, the hand protruding and curled into a darkened claw. Reason flashed in his eyes and went out like clouds across the sun.

"I beg you, let us in! Let us in! These with me are pagan, but they can fight. They can fight!" He looked fearfully over his shoulder at the empty ocean and pulled his useless arm closer to his body. "The ones behind. The ones behind, they ate Father Olsaf. They are dead yet they walk. They walk...they ate Father Olsaf..." He looked up, and Martin saw the eyes that the Father saw when his Son said "why hast thou forsaken me?" They looked at each other for an eternity, broken by the sound of the bells, and the shout from Brother John, "Another scull! More Northmen!"

Martin looked at the priest, and the proud but defeated northman and his ragged band. "Let them in." Brother Michael opened his mouth to object, but Martin silenced him with a raised finger. "Carefully let them in. Arms first, then them."

It took a space to communicate the intent. The mad priest had collapsed into a gibbering heap, and was of no use, and the Martin had to find a brother who understood the pagan warrior's coarse tongue. One of the Frankish monks, Frác, knew many of the German tribal words, and was able to slowly get the point across. Again, the Northmen surprised him. Most of the fore group retreated and allowed the second to the front. Armed every one of them, but women and even children all. Some were lame, others bandaged, and as those of the fore divested themselves of weapons and armor, he saw bloody bandages and wounds that would have been mortal on lesser men and might still be on those who bore them and still walked. Those most able to fight flanked them and faced the sea, where the sails of a larger *knarr* were just becoming visible around the point of the bay.

Upon seeing this, the northmen closed ranks, though those on the other ship would not arrive for some time. All were safely in the walls well before the others landed. It took harsh words from the leader of the band to make the last of them surrender their weapons and armor, a concept the leader was obviously not comfortable with as he made his way unbidden to the wall where Abbot Martin watched the newcomers land. Trailed by Brother Frác, they exchanged short, emphatic words that were a poor substitute for conversation. The northman appraised Martin, obviously relieved to be inside stone walls, but unhappy to be weaponless. Not needing a translator, he put a fist to his chest. "Hrothgar". Martin nodded and replied in kind. With little common language, nothing more could be done. Frác would make one word questions, and get one word answers, or a grunt and a point towards the disembarking northmen. A few searched the smaller vessel, yowling like hounds and tearing open what few containers were on board, caring little for what they found. The rest moved with purpose towards the gate, not much different than those who now had unquiet shelter within the monastery walls. Hrothgar's men, unarmed as they were, stood on the walls alongside the brothers armed with staves and bills. More than a few had acquired stones from the piles on the walkway, but none looked as though to turn on those who gave them shelter. All eyes were on those outside the walls, who stopped uncomfortably close to the gate. Well within stoning distance, but much more easily within the range of the shortbows some of the newcomers bore. They were eager for a fight, some being physically restrained by their fellows from attempting to scale the walls with their bare hands.

Language was not a problem. The leader spoke the unintelligible northman tongue in demanding, haughty tones. Hrothgar, gestured, spoke back, did something emphatic and somehow suggestive with his hands, and then spat over the wall. The leader laughed, and then spoke again, in a different tongue, that which Brother Frác would sometimes be heard praying in. Brother Frác translated as best he could.

"Abbot, he is Forgar, and he demands we send out those you shelter within our walls. Do this, and he will leave with them and not be forced to take them by force, which would make him very angry."

Hrothgar seemed to have understood a few of the words, and made the gesture at Forgar again, who seemed unmoved by its significance.

"Brother Frác, ask him what claim of authority he has over those who have sought refuge with us." He translated to Forgar, who seemed unhappy to be challenged thus, but he responded anyway.

"They are housebreakers and thieves, too cowardly to fight for what they want, instead taking it by cover of darkness and stealing away in their little ship. I rule where they have trespassed, justice is mine to hand out, and those who give them shelter will share in their guilt and punishment."

Again, Hrothgar caught some of the meaning. He looked at the abbot, pointed at Forgar and said two words. Frác translated it. "Liar. Look!" He took the rock he was holding and hurled it at the Northmen, catching one of the more frantic ones solidly in the head. The man crumpled instantly, falling as though dead. Martin was about to turn and scold his guest for this action, when he saw the fallen northman move. Or seem to. As he watched, the body sagged in under its armor and cloak, and maggots by the thousands squirmed from the sleeves and already fleshless eyesockets of the corpse. Hrothgar said a word that Martin understood even before Frác mouthed it. "Walkers". *They are dead, yet they walk.*

There was a pause, as the pretense fell and the brothers stood stunned from the gruesome and unholy sight, then the northmen attacked. The frantic ones in the lead with a few following, and archers in the rear with bows already nocked. The northmen on the walls knew what was coming and ducked, but Martin saw two brothers fall with arrows in their chests, even as Hrothgar pushed him down and arrows whirred through where he had been standing. Northmen inside threw rocks and grabbed the weapons of the fallen monks, and Martin even saw one hold out his hands as though asking a brother for his stave. The brother willingly gave it, then turned his attention to throwing rocks as fast and hard as he could.

The monastery walls were not that high, and roughly made. A man could climb them, and Martin was sure some of the brothers had done so when gates were closed and the temptations of the village were there. The dead northmen climbed them as though they were a mere threshold. He saw a northman grabbed with one hand and thrown over the wall, where other northmen jumped upon him like dogs on a rat, and his screams went on for far too long. More than one brother met the same end as well. But, the dead ones fell to bills and staves, or were broken on the rocks when pushed from the wall. The stench of decayed flesh rose up the wall, strong enough to make ones eyes burn and throat constrict.

## Dark Millennium

The northmen inside the wall fought like demons. Asking no quarter and giving none, striking and punching and kicking, rage and terror vying in their eyes as they slowly beat back the assault. Until perhaps a third of the dead ones were mere corpses again, and the rest had retreated. Of the fallen brothers and refugee northmen, there was no sign except bloody smears outside the wall. Forgar was last to leave the field. This time from out of stoning range, he called "You will join us, or you will feed us. There is no other choice." And with an echoing laugh, he turned his back and walked back to the beach with the others.

The evening came chill and damp, as it usually did here, adding grim overtones to a bloody day. Two northmen and two brothers died of wounds they had taken, one of the northmen already weakened from a previous fight. Several others were unfit for anything but a sickbed. The injured priest the northmen brought lapsed in and out of consciousness, alternately frighteningly lucid and frighteningly incoherent. The priest's name remained unknown, he was not willing to speak it for some reason known only to himself. From him, and from Brother Frác and Hrothgar, Martin was able to piece together the horrific tale. Of how shortly after Easter, their small mission was awoken by a clamor in the village. A young man who had died of a flux the week before had wandered into the village dazed, but very much alive. *Or so it seemed.* He did not remember anything past his illness, and having occurred so close to Easter, it was seen as a miracle and great sign of the grace of the Divine.

But he disappeared two days later, as did his father, another of the young men from the village and a babe in arms, taken from her mother's arms by the youth, never to be seen again. And over the next two weeks, others disappeared, not returning from the fields at dusk, or a scream heard in the distance, and no sign of the lost one ever found. Until more than half the village was missing, including the headman, Forgar. *Hrothgar's half-brother.* All the missing showed up one day, and laid siege to the village, stealing the ships so none could escape. They demanded one person come out to speak for the village. Father Olsaf chose to be the one. Forgar slit his throat and drank from the fountaining blood, while the others tore the flesh from his still-warm body. They then stormed the low walls of the village, and were barely beaten off. The priest suffered the injury to his arm at this time, but was still clear of thought. It was his plan for the escape.

There were those who from their injuries knew their time was at hand, and those who would not leave the side of the ones they loved. These agreed to be a distraction, to try to escape into the hills and woods, making noise as though all the village was with them. The rest, those who could run and fight, and the priest, as one to bear witness for them among the Christians, would try to sneak along the coast and find a vessel, braving the ocean at night in hopes of being free.

*It worked.* They took the first ship they found. The screams of the ones left behind echoed down the fjord and chased them almost to the open ocean. Their *knarr* was perhaps the worst of those from the village, nearly ready to be dismantled and barely seaworthy. They rowed all night, going south and simply staying far enough from land that they could barely hear the surf. With dawn, they found they had few provisions and little water, but such was the fear of that behind them, they did not beach until past dusk, huddling in the lee of trees and rocks, not even daring a fire. With the second morn, they were able to find water at least, and put to sea again, only to find by noon that Forgar was in pursuit. His sail grew from a spot on the horizon to a recognisable ship. Forgar's ship gained upon them, slowly but steadily. Darkness did not halt the flight. A clear sky gave sufficient moon to see the shore, and the ghostly outline of a sail in the distance behind them. A mist and calm before dawn confounded Forgar, who went in a different direction than Hrothgar's vessel, giving them a few hours reprieve. This ended with the dawn, but the mercy of the Divine appeared again with sight of Saint Samuel's.

*And after that, things needed no translation.*

Outside, only small lamps cut into the darkness, illuminating barely enough of the wall to prevent surprise in the dark. In the distance, fires burned, and the sounds of hammering and splintering timber could be heard. Hrothgar's ship was certainly no more. The northmen inside the walls had been returned their weapons as soon as possible, though Martin was still filled with unease at the thought of violence and unbelievers within the walls. He tried to ask matters of faith to Hrothgar through Brother Frác, pointing at the pagan hammer around Hrothgar's neck, and the cross around his own. The best reply he could get was translated by Frác as "wait and see if Martin's God could protect him better than his own."

Throughout the evening, brothers came to Martin asking if they should give the northmen free rein. The northmen were asking questions few could understand, looking for things in storerooms and pantries, taking what they wanted and not explaining why, at least not in a language most could fathom. Already, several barrels had been dismantled, and northmen were banging improvised shields together. The barrel hoops had disappeared, and sounds could be heard from the small smithy, as someone was no doubt making implements of destruction.

No attack came during the night, though sounds of industry came in through the darkness, and no one slept at ease. As dawn approached, so did the dead northmen. The mast of the smaller *knarr* had been dismantled, cut in two and lashed together as a battering ram. Planking protected the front, and dead northmen held shields to protect them from stones hurled down from above. Unlike the attack of the day before, this was calculated. Dead ones patrolled the perimeter, forcing the defenders away from the gate. Forgar directed from a safe distance, and archers stayed out of stoning range and fired only when they had a good target. The gate was strong, but the Saint Samuel's was not a castle, and the sun had not yet broken the horizon when the first snapping of timbers was heard. Defenders rushed to position, as the dead shield holders drew weapons and dead archers made ready. The northmen drew the ram back a final time, and heaved it forward.

A roar went up from the dead northmen as the gate buckled inward. They dropped the ram and charged at the opening. Monks and northmen prepared for the charge did not see the mad priest step from behind, a crucifix in his good hand. A voice that belied his youth roared, "You shall NOT pass!" The dead northman in front gave a guttural snort and raised his sword to strike down the priest, but the laugh was hardly from his throat before his head tilted back and rolled from his shoulders, flesh peeling from it in smoking tatters as charred maggots poured from the hole in his neck. The body crumpled into a noisome pile of rags. Another dead northman tried to approach, but turned back as though burned, clutching the side of his face.

The priest, a fire in his eyes, stepped forward, driving the dead ones back, and the defenders were right behind him, jabbing at those who were distracted, with the occasional rock tossed from above at the hissing and angry dead. The priest stood there silently, a white-knuckled grip on the crucifix, holding a dozen dead northmen at bay. The dead were stalemated, until Forgar came to the front.

What he said to the priest none ever knew, nor what the priest quietly said in response to enrage Forgar so. Forgar stepped up and grabbed the crucifix, and maintained a grip even after his hand burst into flames. The sword in his other hand bit deep into the priest's neck and cast him to the side, into the remnants of the gate, where he tumbled and lay still. The priest no longer a threat, the dead poured through the ruined gate.

Pagan and Christian fought the dead that walked. Bodies fresh and corrupt lay about the courtyard, in the halls and even on the altar. In the end, there were too few living to recount the details. Hrothgar was found dead outside the room where the children were sheltered, a sword through his ribs, and his own sword through the ribcage of a weeks-dead corpse that wore Forgar's cloak. The door was battered down, and two of the northern women lay in pools of blood, daggers in another foul corpse, while a third screamed hysterically and brandished an iron-shod staff at all who approached until she suddenly collapsed and burst into tears.

Only a handful of brothers and northmen were in sufficient health to tend to the living and the dead. Though it pained the abbot to do so, those of the monks and the northmen who perished were buried in the pagan way, burned on a pyre built from the smaller *knarr*, so that naught but ashes remained, though the ashes were interred, and a cross placed upon their resting spot.

*This island, this place, is no longer a place for a village, for women or for children. Those, and the northmen who wished, took the remaining ship and departed south, with Brother Jordan and a young Northman to carry this message. Though I am loath to bring men of war into this place of spiritual refuge, two of the northmen have made it clear that they wish to stay and join us as monks. It does not darken my heart to accept them, for I feel that the horror we have seen has not ended, but has only begun.*

*By the grace of God, in service to Christ,*

*Abbot Martin of Saint Samuel's*

## Dark Millennium

▼ **WHAT IT'S ABOUT - Dark Millennium** is about living through an apocalypse while still recovering from the last one. The Roman Empire collapsed centuries ago. Beset by barbarians from without and corruption from within, the greatest empire the world had ever seen crumbled, leaving chaos in its wake. Then as people began to get back on their feet, the Huns swept in from the east, plundering and burning what was left. Only through the grace of the Divine did Pope Leo turn back Attila and his hordes, and it was seen as a stamp of approval on the early Church that Attila died within a year of threatening Rome.

The Church swept north and west, not as a conquering army, but just as relentless, winning hearts and minds and swaying peasant and king alike to its cause, perhaps with a greater plan, perhaps only as the unknowing hand of the Divine, preparing men for the End Time.

For in 1033, on the millennium of Christ's death, the first seal on the scroll of seven seals was broken, as foretold in the secret revelations of Saint John. The dead rose from their graves, and he who was to become the Antichrist was born. A world which had not seen tangible proof of the Divine for a thousand years was now greeted with tangible proof of His absence.

War rages in Heaven, leaving the Divine nothing to spare to help those made in his image, so men fight with only faith and swords against a foe that is already dead and ever hungry for the flesh of the living. The dead have amassed not just in the lands of the Christians, but around the world. In Spain, the *reconquista* is abandoned, as Muslim and Christian fight side by side against a common foe, at least for the time being. In China, warriors of the Liao Dynasty fight armies of undead marching to the command of emperors long buried and Moscow's walls turn back the walking corpses of those whose great-grandchildren will someday be known as the Mongol Horde.

And this was but the *first* of the seals to be broken. Six more remain, the seven trumpets are yet to sound, and the secret voices of the seven thunders have yet to be heard. The Dark Millennium has begun...