

Odric, Master Tactician

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A town crier hollered the evening news on the cobblestone street below the open window. “Execution at Bloodless Wall! Tomorrow at sunrise! The Healers of Heron are at Child’s Wall tomorrow...”

When Odric last looked out the window, it had been early afternoon. Now a cold mist had settled on Thraben, and the city was cloaked in evening shadows. *Where is the moon?* Odric’s arm jerked involuntarily, nearly upending his ink jar. *No*, he reminded himself. *It no longer matters*. The phases of the moon were no longer predictors of life and death now that Avacyn had returned and cleansed the world. *Or at least begun to...*

He glanced across the oak table at Grete, his lieutenant, who looked surprised by his sudden movement. Sir Odric, Master Tactician, Commander of the Gavony Riders and Recipient of the Moonsilver Accommodation didn’t startle easily.

“Sir?” Grete asked.

“Darkness fell,” he told her. She glanced out the window, and he saw similar emotions play across her features. *We’ve spent too many years as prey*. Too many years spent cowering in the shadows.



Art by Karl Kopinski

“There’s still no sign of Ludevic,” Grete continued, scanning the parchment. “A miller spotted him near Estwald, but he’d moved on before the cathars could detain him. So the hunt continues.”

Just the thought of the mad alchemist made his head ache. Odric leaned back and pressed his palms against his temples. This was a temporary assignment—one he had requested in hopes of getting an angel’s-eye view of Innistrad. Every regiment sent in daily dispatches of what they encountered in the field. From these reports, Odric was piecing together where the Church’s power was still being threatened. But he didn’t enjoy sitting in a leather chair in a cathedral chamber. He was a battlefield man, much better suited to combat maneuvers than negotiating the politics of the Avacynian Church.

“What of your friends around Hanweir?” Odric asked and was rewarded with a slight smile from the deadly serious Grete. She’d led an assault against a legion of ghouls ravaging the moorlands, a success that had earned her the promotion to second in command.



Blazing Torch | Art by Michael Komarck

“We’re hunting down the last stragglers. Gisa is being transported from the Rider’s Lock up to Thraben next week.”

“Triple the escort,” Odric said. “She’s caused enough trouble in my lifetime.”

Grete nodded and scanned the last dispatch. Only a few more days, and Odric’s administrative duties in Thraben would be done. His time here had been valuable. He knew that demons were still on the loose, but Avacyn herself was focused on the Helvault escapees. Necromantic activity still plagued the moorlands, but nothing like the heyday of Gisa and Geralf’s tyranny. Sigarda’s forces were hunting the perpetrators of the Nephalia Massacre. The vampires had all but slunk back to Stensia. *Someday soon, I will purge that province myself, but first I must be sure that Avacyn’s blessings hold.*

“The mayor’s son in Torbach tumbled down a river bank and broke his leg.”

Odric sighed. “Does the mayor of Torbach truly request the Church’s assistance to fix a boy’s leg?”

“It says he fell fleeing a... werewolf. He later died of a fever and gangrene.”

As Odric pushed himself to his feet, it felt as if a steel trap had closed around his stomach. Every morning since the Cursemute had rid the land of the lycanthrope curse, he’d fallen to his knees praising Avacyn’s blessing. But in his heart, he doubted. What if the wolfir reverted to a murderous state? What if the abominations that had slaughtered so many of his kin returned?

“Rouse our regiment,” he told Grete. “It seems our days in Thraben have come to an abrupt end.”



Odric, Master Tactician | Art by Michael Komarck

The Mayor of Torbach was a pompous, red-faced administrator who took power after Avacyn returned. *A sheep in fancy clothes*, Odric thought. *Not a leader during the darkest hours*. The mayor had been ranting at them since they arrived in his chamber. Grete shifted uncomfortably beside Odric, no doubt wondering why he was letting this tirade go on so long.

“I demand to know! What is this new devilry? Werewolves walk even during the half moon? Did you not promise that this curse was lifted from us? These wolfir may slaughter us even during the daylight?”

“Sir, there is no reason to believe that a wolfir—” Odric said.

“It slaughtered the widow of Bitterheart Hill!” the mayor interrupted. “Destroyed her cottage just last night! And took its time under her roof. Maybe it slumbered a bit? Going to cook a hock of meat in her fireplace?”

“The creature was in her cottage?” Odric asked.

“This vile creature is terrorizing my village. Where are the angels? The cathars waste time building bridges and trimming apple trees and...”

“One more question,” Odric interrupted. “Has it attacked other cottages? Or just the widow’s?”

“Cottages, no. But my son! He was just a boy...”

Odric laid his hand on the mayor’s shoulder. At his touch, the man abruptly stopped speaking, and tears brimmed in his brown eyes.

“We will find the monster that killed your son and put its head on a pike,” Odric assured the mayor, who had lost his bluster and seemed to have no more words for them. Odric and Grete found their own way back to the street where their horses waited.

“He acted as if all it was our fault,” Grete said angrily.

“He’s a grieving man,” Odric replied. *A man who has lost a son to a werewolf*, he thought. *Just as I have.*



Bane of Hanweir | Art by Wayne Reynolds

As they rode toward the edge of the village, the red sun dropped low to the horizon. Above, a sliver of pale moon appeared in the indigo heavens. The phases of the moon once had been Odric’s guiding hand. The shape of the moon would figure into his battle tactics as much as supply lines and the morale of his cathars. Odric spent years watching the night sky, noting how the moon touched the world in unexpected ways. Some seemed trivial. The leaves of the maple curled downward during a full moon. Others were crucial to survival. Ghouls moved quicker during a new moon. A waxing moon brought unnatural fighting among the rank and file. With Avacyn’s Cursemute, Odric secretly felt he had lost one of his tactical advantages. The moon was playing new games, and Odric had yet to learn the rules.

“What are your thoughts?” Grete asked over the thud of the horses’ hooves.

“I knew of the widow who was killed. They called her the Bitterheart Witch. Remember how he said it stayed in her cottage? Something about her attracted the monster. We’ll set a trap near there.”

As they quickened their horses and made toward camp, Odric’s eyes fixed on the pattern of mist around the meek sliver in the sky. Whatever evil was now manifesting itself, it would stop in the shadow of the widows’ cottage. He would mount its head on the gates of Thraben.



Riders of Gavony | Art by Volkan Baga

By midnight, there was no moon at all. He and Grete lay in the undergrowth at the edge of a clearing. The only light came from a witchbane's orb, a magical ward against curses that hovered at the edge of the trees. The spell was the widow's handiwork, from a time before she'd been outcast by the villagers as a witch. Odric had poured the blood of the widow on the ground below the orb. Blood he'd taken from her lifeless corpse in the catacombs of the local church.

The strange thing was that when he'd viewed her corpse, he'd seen no signs of violence on her. There was no evidence she'd been killed by a werewolf attack, which Odric had assumed after talking with the mayor. She looked peaceful enough to have died of old age.



Witchbane Orb | Art by John Avon

A hooting call broke the night's silence. He recognized it as a cathar's signal that something had passed through the perimeter of scouts he'd placed around the grove. He glanced at Grete, and she silently stood up and disappeared into the shadows. Odric moved into a crouching position, waiting for the second signal, which would confirm if it was natural or unnatural...

The signal came again, urgently. *Unnatural, then*.

Odric saw it before he heard it. A shadow—much taller than an average man—stretched across the clearing. He'd fought countless werewolves and none had moved with such quiet deliberation. Odric glanced up at the inky sky, suddenly doubting his strategy. But the monstrosity had entered the clearing and was loping toward the scent of the widow's blood. Whatever was approaching, there was no time to question the plan. *Fear holds no place in faith's battle plan.*

Odric shouted to the cathars in the treetops, who cast down the heavy net, sending the creature's massive bulk onto the forest floor. Odric sprinted toward it as it struggled under the ropes. He unsheathed his sword as he ran, ready to slice through ropes and neck in one blow.

"Wait!" screamed Grete, attempting to intercept her commander. "Wait! It has an axe!"



Crusader of Odric | Art by Michael Komarck

Odric froze, seeing the massive weapon on the ground behind the monster. Then he saw the arm—a human arm—a hand, and human eyes, peering out of a haggard face crisscrossed with sickly black veins.

“In Avacyn’s name,” Odric thundered. “What are you?”

“I’m weakened, cursed, and no threat to you,” it said. “I’m Garruk Wildspeaker...”



Garruk, the Veil-Cursed | Art by Eric Deschamps

The guttural voice infuriated Odric. Every corpse that had been mutilated by a werewolf flashed through his memory. He would never forget the raw carnage of the attacks and the senseless rage that left human bodies in bloody tatters. The only way Odric could comprehend those murders was if they were done by mindless beasts. Mindless beasts don't have language or a voice to speak it. And never a name. *Garruk Wildspeaker*. Even when Odric killed werewolves in human form, he never spoke their names. In his mind, the curse stripped them of any human identity they once possessed.

Odric bashed the blunt end of his sword against the monster's temple, hearing the crack of skull as it shattered under the weight of his blow. It slumped to the ground. He yanked the net off the monster and grabbed a handful of its long matted hair. He yanked it back to expose the bare throat where lifeblood still pulsed through its unnatural veins.

“Wait!” Grete was at his shoulder.

Odric lifted his sword. *One blow to sunder the head from the body .*

“It’s not a werewolf! Sir, Avacyn’s blessings didn’t fail us.”

He wanted its head. *I’ll throw it at the feet of Avacyn and scream the name of every person murdered in her absence.*

“Let us bring it to Thraben—alive. Leave the days of slaughter behind us. It’s a new day in Innistrad.”

He wanted to scream at her, too. She’d fought the same wars and lived in the same grisly world as he. But unlike him, her conscience was untarnished. *She’s still hopeful.* Grete’s compassion would kill her someday. *Someday soon.* Odric let go of the monster and sheathed his sword.

“Drug him and tie him down. It’s a long road back to Thraben. Let Avacyn measure the worth of his life.”