Before the Snow

To be read aloud by one of the players, before the first scene.

> Read slowly. Pause at each line break. The lines in bold italics deserve a breath before and after. It takes about three minutes. When you finish, the GM takes over.

THE WORLD

Listen. This is the world as the Church tells it.

Once, demons ruled the earth. We call that time the Age of Ash. Men were slaves, and the sky was the colour of a cold hearth.

Then the First Saints came, and they sealed the demons beneath the ground. We call it the Binding. Most of the Saints did not live to see it hold. Their names are feast days now.

This is the Hallowed Age. The Church keeps the Binding, and the Church keeps us. It keeps the calendar, the schools and the hospitals. It keeps the relics in their silver boxes, and the ledger of what each of us owes.

Magic is forbidden. Use it, the priests say, and you invite the Horror. Nobody agrees on what the Horror is. A hunger, some say. A quiet that follows you home. A stranger in a familiar face. The Inquisition hunts those who meddle, and the Inquisition is patient.

The land we live on is consecrated. You can see where it ends: a wayshrine at the crossroads, a boundary stone at the edge of the last field. Inside the stones there are roads, tithes and market days. Outside them lie the Unhallowed lands, wild and old and full of ruins from before the Binding. Few go there. Fewer come back with the same number of friends.

TARNWICK

Tarnwick sits right at the edge.

It is a village of three hundred souls at the foot of the Greave Pass, at the end of the last road anyone bothers to mend. Grey stone houses, roofed in slate against the snow. A tithe barn. A church with a squat tower and a cracked bell. Goats on the hillside. Every door has a line of salt across the step, and nobody remembers who started it.

Above Tarnwick the mountain climbs into cloud. A day's walk up the pass, on a shelf of rock, stands the Priory of Saint Cordula: the last consecrated ground before the Unhallowed lands begin. The brothers pray for the valley, and the valley sends them oil, flour and candles.

Every dusk, the brothers light a fire on their bell tower. It is a small thing, a point of orange against the dark. But in Tarnwick people look up for it before they bar their doors. Children are taught to find it. While it burns, the brothers are alive, and the mountain is quiet.

Three nights ago, the fire did not burn.

Nor the night after. Nor last night.

✠ STOP HERE. THE GM TAKES IT FROM THE ROAD.