

The Vampire 951

Chapter 951: Heila's Gambit (Part Two)

The forest itself was too far away for her to draw on, but there were still small stands of trees in hollows between the hills where streams flowed into shallow ponds that had frozen over in the bitter cold of Hauke's snowstorm. Those trees were young, many of them less than a dozen years old, but they were enough for Heila to do something with, even if it wasn't as much as she wished.

"Through nature's heart and healer's grace,

Let soothing waters find their place,

Let healing waters wash away

The wounds of war's savagery,

Till every soldier is free from pain,

Beneath this sweet and gentle rain."

To Diarmuid's ears, and even to the acolytes standing with him, the demon witch's words sounded as sweet and reverent as any prayer and the power those words conjured was as gentle and mild as the morning sun's light on their faces.

All along the walls and across the entire plaza, pale, silvery-green drops of rain formed beneath the clear night sky, falling to the earth in a soft, gentle drizzle. Where the raindrops splashed on wounded men, they felt the pain of their injuries fading away. Even more astonishingly, the wounds themselves showed visible signs of healing.

"My leg," an astonished archer said as he felt the throbbing, pulsing pain of the wound fading away as his flesh seemed to move and twitch until the head of an arrow and the broken bit of shaft attached to it was pushed free of the wound. There was still a deep cut where the arrow had been, and it was tender when he prodded it, but that was all! "Holy Lord of Light, it really is a miracle," he whispered as he basked in the healing raindrops that swept away the pain.

Not five paces away, one of the Golden Eyed skirmishers snarled at the foolish human who gave credit to their savage god even when it was clear that Lady Heila had chosen to heal the wounds of friend and foe alike. He didn't know if it was because she had no way to exclude the humans from her healing or because she genuinely wished to spare their lives, but he was hardly important enough to question the decisions of a witch.

"Not your god, fool," the lupine skirmisher snarled, speaking in a thickly accented version of the king's common tongue. "Witch's healing. Stronger than your god."

"No but, that can't be," the archer said as he scrambled back a full two paces further away from the demon he'd thought was dead after it took a spear thrust to the abdomen that penetrated from the front of its stomach all the way through the back of its light armor. "Witches are evil creatures who know nothing but slaughter," he mumbled as he felt the smooth, barely tender edges of his wound. "They couldn't do this..."

Similar scenes played out across the plaza as soldiers who had crumpled under the weight of their injuries finally found relief from the most unlikely of paces. Even Sir Tommin's anguished sobs lost a bit of their intensity as the pain of his wounds no longer tormented him, leaving him trapped only in the dark emptiness of his blindness and shattered faith.

Even for a witch like Heila, it would be impossible to fully heal every injured soldier with a single spell, even if she had been standing at the heart of a willow grove that was hundreds of years old. There were too many men, too many wounds, and even if she had all the power in the world to draw upon, she could only touch so many injuries at once before the pain of it all overwhelmed her.

Already, the feeling of connecting to hundreds of soldiers at once, human and Eldritch alike, was enough to drive her to her knees. For every wound she soothed, from the tiniest cut to shattered bones and severed limbs, she experienced the pain of...

"RRRRRRRRRAAAAAA!" Heila cried as the pain of wound after wound, layered one on top of another, tormented her diminutive body, but she refused to give in or release her ritual before she had accomplished what she set out to do.

While fully healing the injured would have been impossible, she knew very well that simply surviving the initial injury and the first day or two of healing was the greatest challenge that lay ahead of these

soldiers. So while she couldn't heal the wounds entirely, she stopped bleeding, purged the beginnings of infection, and mended flesh as much as the body could have with two full days of rest.

It wasn't perfect, but to the men who were suffering at the brink of death, and to the countless more who were in too much pain to stand, it was every bit as miraculous as what Diarmuid had done for the injured acolyte and on a far greater scale.

"Quickly," Hugo commanded a nearby soldier as he stepped forward to offer his support to Heila, who staggered under the strain of her ritual. "Have your men drag the injured to safety, make space to receive any man who throws down his weapons," he said as he cradled the diminutive witch in his arms.

"Hmm," Heila murmured softly as she pushed back from Hugo's support. "Sister Isabell was right about you, Hugo," she said with a faint smile while she regathered her strength. "You're a good man when you aren't suffering under Owain's thumb."

"You're in command," she told the startled lord as she returned her wand to the belt at her waist and drew the white, gleaming blade of Snowfang in its place. "Someone has to stop Loman," she said as she gazed toward the distant tower and the shining light of Loman's Bow of Stars.

"And if Dame Sybyll catches him first," she added as she looked at the departing figure of the Crimson Knight, who had dashed for the side streets almost as soon as the final templar fell, pausing only long enough to retrieve her giant axe and helm. "If she gets to Loman before I can capture him, then I'm afraid there won't be anything left of him to take prisoner..."

Chapter 952: Mad Dash (Part One)

Heila was mad.

Heila was mad. No, mad was far too mild of a word to describe the diminutive witch as she raced across the rooftops of Hanrahan Town, her breath coming in ragged gasps that burned her throat in the frigid air. Each time she reached the edge of a roof, she had to force herself to draw on Snow Fang's power one more time, sending flurries of snow into the air to use as stepping stones to the next building.

Lunacy might be a better word to describe her rush across the rooftops in the night. If this had been how she started the battle, perhaps it would have been a reasonable, even a wise method of avoiding townsfolk and rushing to assault the Hanrahan Keep directly.

But this wasn't the beginning of the battle, and the strain she felt was showing. It should have been almost effortless to leap between rooftops, she'd had plenty of time to practice with Snow Fang since she received the blade from Master Erkembalt, yet now it required conscious effort and desperate concentration just to conjure flurries that would bridge the gap between rooftops.

Her legs trembled with exhaustion from the magical healing that had drained her reserves, and twice already she'd misjudged a landing, her cloven hooves slipping on ice-slick thatch as rotted timbers creaked ominously beneath her slight weight.

Focus, she commanded herself, taking a deep, steadying breath and slowing her pace as another roof beam groaned under her feet. The damage from the recent blizzard was everywhere, from missing sections of thatch to broken support beams barely held together by hasty repairs, and even entire sections of roofing that sagged dangerously where snow had accumulated in the hollows that formed when entire sections of a roof collapsed.

"Curse that stupid, greedy, human lord," she muttered as she leaped to another roof, landing harder than intended when her usual grace failed her. The impact sent her crashing through a section of damaged thatch, her armored coat catching on broken timbers as she scrambled to avoid falling into the house below.

"Isabell was right about the neglect in this place," she said as she pulled herself free and resumed the charge across the rooftops that only a lunatic would contemplate in the state Heila was in. But even lunacy fell short of describing her plans as she approached the walls of Hanrahan Keep and the archers who stood atop them.

There were no buildings within a hundred paces of the keep's walls, and Baron Hanrahan orders reserved more than twenty skilled archers and twice as many men-at-arms to defend his fortress, even during the demon assault on the walls.

If Loman had realized the Baron had a reserve who were commanded to remain in place at the keep, he might have sent them to the outer walls, but there hadn't been time to discuss his deployments with the baron before he was escorted out of the great hall.

Heila's heart hammered in her chest as she sprinted toward the edge of town and the wide gap that led to the keep. It was a different form of 'mad' that kept her moving as fast as she was able, even though it meant leaving everyone else behind in order to reach Loman Lothian as quickly as possible.

She was already furious at the sneak attack while they'd been trying to convince the human defenders to surrender. The only saving grace in it was that Lord Jalal would survive with nothing more than the loss of his arm. If he had died, Heila didn't know if she would have been able to forgive the Lothian lord for striking such a cowardly blow.

But when she saw the wanton disregard for the lives of his own men as Loman's rain of luminous arrows consumed the courtyard, it took every last bit of her restraint to remain in the west gate plaza to arrange a surrender with Inquisitor Diarmuid. The rage boiling within her chest only grew hotter when she healed the wounded of both armies and fully comprehended how much greater the suffering had become because of Loman's sneak attack.

So much of this could have been prevented if the humans had just accepted the defeat of their champion, Tommin. Or, if Loman insisted on representing his people, he should have taken the field against Dame Sybyll in Tommin's place.

"Ashlynn would never have been so cowardly," Heila muttered as she ran. "Even when she was weak, she was braver than this." Ashlynn hadn't hidden or resorted to cowardly tricks when she fought the Tuscans on the frozen lake. She hadn't harmed her own people when she fought against the Frost Walker Ancestors in the High Pass.

Ashlynn was living proof that humans weren't all part of the cowardly, selfish, murderous pestilence that voraciously consumed Eldritch land and Eldritch lives. Ollie was too, and from the impression she had of her so far, Isabell was the same. There were good humans among the common folk and the nobility. But Loman, it seemed, lived up to his Lothian name and all the wickedness of the corrupted Church as well.

"Aaaah!" Heila cried in surprise as a luminous arrow came streaking towards her. With a crash and a slide that nearly saw her falling to the cobblestone street below, she flung herself sideways at the last minute, narrowly avoiding the first arrow of light, and sliding within a handsbreadth of the follow-up shot that buried itself into the snow less than a handsbreadth from her hooves.

She only had a heartbeat, two at the most, to grab the hilt of Snow Fang and fling herself into the sky before a third arrow struck the place she'd just been lying in the snow, and she fell halfway to the cobblestone streets before she gained her footing on the swirling flurry of snowflakes.

"Finally," she said with a relieved grin as she dashed higher into the air, pulling a whirlwind of icy air with her that set the long tails of her armored leather coat flapping behind her like a pair of leathery wings.

Her relief was short-lived, however, when she glanced over her shoulder and realized that the deadly rain of arrows pelting the west gate plaza hadn't abated in the slightest!

She had expected that Loman would have to abandon his assault on the soldiers in the plaza in order to shift his focus to the approaching threat of a witch, but it seemed like she'd still underestimated the young Lothian Lord.

Somehow, it seemed like Loman Lothian could both assault the forces in the west gate plaza and fire the sort of lethal arrows that had nearly claimed Lord Jalal's life directly at her, and if one of those arrows struck her diminutive figure... She was sure to lose far more than just a limb.

Chapter 953: Mad Dash (Part Two)

Heila had finally run out of rooftops to run along as she reached the wide plaza outside Hanrahan Keep's outer walls. There might not be a moat around the frontier fortress, but the cobblestone plaza that played host to bustling markets on most days transformed into a killing field exposed to the castle's defenders when it was left empty as it was now.

This was exactly the sort of situation that Ashlynn's tactic of giving giant shields to the Tuscans was designed to thwart, but Heila had no time to wait for Ipiktok to come to her rescue. Instead, she gathered as much energy as she could from the scattering of shade trees at the edges of the plaza before launching herself into the air in a mad dash to pass over the outer wall and reach the tower where Loman Lothian stood with his Bow of Stars.

-PFFSSSEEEET!- -PFFSSSEEEET!- -PFFSSSEEEET!-

Ordinary arrows began whistling past Heila from the archers positioned along the keep's walls. Unlike Loman's divine attacks, these were simple steel points and wooden shafts, but there were dozens of

them, creating a deadly storm she had to navigate while maintaining her precarious footing on swirling snowflakes.

The snow-covered ground only made matters worse for her. Even though she kept herself in the air above the snow, until she climbed higher than the top of the wall, those archers were looking down on her and her dark leather hat and long-coat made her a very visible target against the backdrop of the white snowfield below.

"Snow, dance and swirl!" Heila commanded, raising Snow Fang high as she poured more of her dwindling energy into the glittering blade carved from a Frost Walker's horn. A thick cloud of spinning snowflakes erupted around her, creating a swirling white barrier that made her nearly invisible to the archers on the wall as she pushed her legs to the limit, sprinting through the air in an attempt to pass over the keep's wall as quickly as she could.

"Keep firing! Aim fer tha' middle of tha snow-cloud!" a veteran captain shouted from atop the walls, refusing to let his men become confused or distracted just because the witch was using her dark arts to hide from them.

Unlike the men on the outer wall of the town, the men who defended the keep itself were well trained soldiers who trained throughout the entire year. Many of them, including the captain barking orders, had even fought during the War of Inches, and this wasn't their first time confronting demons or the strange things that could occur around them.

A witch might be even more fearsome than an ordinary demon, but the captain refused to give his men time to think about that as he shouted orders at his men to to give them more important things to think about than being afraid.

"Five silver pennies ta tha' first man ta stick an arrow in tha' witch!" the captain shouted. "And a gold sovereign if ye can knock 'er from tha' sky!"

Heila tried not to think too much about the ordinary archers below. Even when their arrows drew close, the swirling winds that provided her barrier of dancing snowflakes blew the simple wooden arrows away from her. But maintaining the concealing snow cloud while simultaneously using her magic to stay aloft was like trying to carry two serving trays piled high with fine dishes while walking on a tightrope. Each spell competed for her attention and energy, and she could feel her control starting to slip.

-WHOOM!-

Another luminous arrow blazed past her concealment, its radiant trail punching through her snow cloud like a needle through silk. This one came closer to her than any arrow had so far, nearly piercing her hoof and passing close enough that the arrow's passage through the air alone was enough to envelop her hoof and lower leg in a wave of piercing, prickling pain.

"He can see me!" Heila realized in shock as she stared up at the glittering arc of starlight, just barely visible above the ramparts of the tower. She didn't know how, but when she looked upward, she had the uncanny feeling that Loman Lothian was looking directly back at her, despite the obfuscation of the dancing snowflakes.

Abandoning stealth for speed, Heila burst out of her snow cloud and angled sharply upward, racing toward the tower where Loman's position blazed with starlight. As she climbed higher into the night sky, she began to gather snow from the castle wall below, compacting it into dense, ice-hard spheres.

"Let's see how you handle this!" she called out, hurling a barrage of snowballs toward the tower with as much force as she could manage. Each projectile struck with the impact of a sling stone, exploding against the stone ramparts in a spray of ice and snow that forced the starlit archer to take cover or risk being struck directly.

Unfortunately, while her attack bought her a moment of relief from the luminous arrows from above, it had also revealed her position completely. The archers on the walls below adjusted their aim, sending a fresh volley of steel-tipped arrows arcing toward her position. Worse yet, Loman's bow began to glow even brighter as he prepared another starlight arrow, exposing only the smallest portion of himself as he used the saw-toothed crenelations atop the tower to his advantage.

Heila twisted desperately in midair, her snow-stepping becoming increasingly erratic as fatigue clouded her judgment. One steel arrow struck her shoulder, sticking in the tough leather of her long-coat before falling to the ground below when it failed to penetrate the tough hide deeply enough to threaten her. Another arrow, however, passed so close to her legs that she felt the fletching brush across her thigh as it sliced through the fabric of her breeches.

"Almost!" the captain shouted from below. "A silver penny for each of ye," he cried before the men could become dejected at their near miss. "Now do it again, lads, an' this time, make 'er bleed!"

Chapter 954: Mad Dash (Part Three)

The arrows from below were proving to be an even greater threat than she'd feared since her armor struggled to protect her from someone standing directly beneath her and for a moment, Heila had to refocus her assault of snowballs on the men on the walls. She couldn't spare the time to aim them, but the cries of pain and frantic shouting to raise shields told her that she'd achieved at least some success... but then Loman's arrow came.

Unlike the devastating bolt that had nearly killed Lord Jalal, this arrow was smaller, and dimmer, but still more than deadly enough to kill a tired witch. Heila threw herself sideways, but between juggling her spells to reach the tower and fend off the archers below, her exhausted evasion just wasn't fast enough to escape Loman's arrow.

-THUNK!-

The luminous arrow struck her squarely in the head, its radiant point meeting the armored leather of her War Hat with a sound like a hammer striking an anvil. For a terrifying moment, Heila felt the arrow's energy trying to burn through Jacques's masterwork protection, but the Thornback Alligator hide held firm, refusing to yield to the uncanny sharpness of the divine, luminous arrow.

The impact still knocked her head back, leaving her disoriented and seeing stars as it sent her tumbling through the air. Her concentration had completely shattered, and without her sustained focus, both of the spells she'd channeled through Snow Fang unraveled. Heila tumbled nearly twenty feet before she managed to regain control of her magic, gasping as she struggled to create new snowflake footing beneath her hooves.

She was close now, only a few dozen paces from the stone walls of the keep itself. For a moment, Heila abandoned her focus on gaining height, now that she was over the fortress wall and within the keep's bailey she could afford to be low to the ground for a few moments, and instead she dashed through the air toward the wall of the tower itself, forcing Loman to lean out over the rampart and fire straight down if he wanted any chance of hitting her with another of his luminous arrows.

One final luminous arrow streaked past her before she reached the wall of the tower and began climbing higher in the sky, but with its passage, she realized something else about the arrow that had struck her. The moment the first arrow struck her War Hat, her mind had gone blank not only from the impact, but from the overwhelming fear that the arrow would do to her what it had done to Lord Jalal when it tore his arm from his body.

But the arrow that struck her was several times weaker than the one that nearly claimed Lord Jalal's life, and the one that had nearly missed her was much the same. She thought she'd underestimated him when she realized that he could still fire his Bow of Stars even while sustaining the rain of luminous arrows on the west gate plaza, but now, she wasn't so certain.

Was he splitting his power between the two forms of sorcery? Or was the rain of arrows taking a toll on him that was rapidly weakening him? For a moment, Heila was tempted to play a game of cat and mouse with the Lothian Lord, allowing him to wear himself out with his own sorcery, but she discarded the notion as quickly as it came.

In the distance, she could hear crashing from the gatehouse of the keep along with the anguished cries of soldiers dying as they tried to defend it. Dame Sybyll was close to penetrating the keep's defenses herself and there was no time to waste if Heila was going to capture Loman alive.

Extending her senses across the bailey, Heila smiled as she discovered a small grove of trees that were nearly as old as the keep itself. Kept as a private reserve for the baron's own table, a section of the bailey held walnut, apple, plum, and even hazelnut trees.

Fruit trees were generous and giving by nature, and they offered up their energy freely when Heila reached out to them, providing not only the energy she needed to renew her race against Dame Sybyll to the top of Loman's tower, but a gentle nourishment that helped to replenish her body and clearing her increasingly sluggish and exhausted thoughts.

Her joy at receiving a boon from Baron Hanrahan's own fruit trees withered and died moments later when she finally burst above the tower's ramparts. The sight that greeted her eyes was more horrifying than anything she'd imagined in her rush to confront the Lothian lord... and she finally understood both the source of his tremendous power and why it seemed to be failing him the longer the battle went on.

Standing atop the tower, Heila found not only a black-robed Loman Lothian, holding his glittering Bow of Stars, but twelve more men dressed in the plain white robes with gold collars that marked them as temple acolytes.

Or at least, there had been twelve of them. Seven of those men now lay dead, their faces gaunt and pale, contorted in expressions of pain, fear, regret and loss. Their final moments had clearly been anything but reverent as Loman's sorcery consumed their lives like kindling for the bonfire that burned at the center of the tower.

The remaining five men stood rigidly where they'd been positioned, forming the points of a constellation that Heila recognized as The First Hunter and humans called The Ascended Archer. The place where each man stood shimmered with a pale white light, like dozens of twinkling stars, and faint glowing lines ran across the stones of the tower to connect each man to the sorcery that was even now raining down radiant arrows on the west gate plaza.

But not a single strand of that life consuming magic connected to Loman Lothian. The disciple of Exemplar Domas Onaitis stood alone with his Bow of Stars, offering nothing to the powerful sorcery that had claimed the lives of five acolytes on the tower and who knew how many human soldiers and Eldritch warriors in the west gate plaza.

"You monster!" Heila shouted as her cloven hooves touched the cold stones of the tower roof at last. "How could you do this to your own people!"

Chapter 955: Whipped (Part One)

"How could you do this to your own people!"

Heila's words of condemnation rang out across the top of the tower like a thunderclap, filled with a combination of horrified revulsion and righteous fury that momentarily made Loman take a step back from the diminutive witch.

Her words pierced his heart as effectively as his arrows pierced the flesh of his foes, striking directly at the vulnerability that he'd struggled to harden his heart against. He knew when he called for twelve arrows that some of them would snap under the strain of helping him to fight the demons, but he'd never imagined that it would be so many of them.

Just like he'd never dreamed that the rain of arrows would be so difficult to control once he'd completed the sacred rite to call down the Holy Lord of Light's judgment. But just as it had been with the first arrow he fired from his glittering Bow of Stars, once the arrow had been loosed, it was impossible to call it back, no matter how much he hated the price the Holy Lord of Light demanded for receiving his divine intervention.

"You have no right to judge me, demon," Loman snapped as he raised his Bow of Stars and pulled back on the glittering bowstring to produce another luminous arrow. "Not when you brought an army to slaughter and pillage from the people of this town!"

"You know that's not why we came," Heila said, standing unflinching before the black-robed disciple and his radiant bow. "The fight is over. The only people dying in the plaza are your own people! You've lost. Admit it, surrender, and stop this heinous sorcery before it claims any more lives," she pleaded.

Deep within Loman's heart, there was a part of him that wanted to do exactly as the diminutive demon asked. To surrender and set down the heavy burden on his shoulders that only grew worse with each soldier or acolyte who died in battle. To dismiss the sacred rite and send the surviving acolytes home to their temple to live out what remained of their lives in the peace of a grateful Church.

He wanted to, but he knew that he couldn't. There was no surrender and no retreat before evil, even if it claimed all of their lives. Exemplar Domas had taught him long ago that he would need to learn to clad his heart in radiant armor if he wanted to become an Exemplar in his own right one day. He couldn't let his desire to spare people from a moment of suffering or tragedy lead them into several lifetimes of darkness and struggle to earn redemption for their failings.

"Stars above, guide my aim," Loman prayed softly as he made his decision. Half a heartbeat later, his fingers relaxed along with a steady, gentle exhale of breath as he loosed his radiant arrow at the diminutive demon witch.

Heila's cloven hooves kicked off the stone roof of the tower with tremendous force the instant she heard his prayer, leaping directly over the radiant arrow as she uncoiled her Willow Whip from its palace on her hip.

-CRACK-

The first strike from her whip was awkward and rushed, but the braided willow wood of her whip came alive in her hands nonetheless, extending far beyond its natural length as Heila's witchcraft flowed through the living weapon. Even though it snapped harmlessly in the air near Loman's head, the seemingly impossible reach of her personal weapon made it clear that nowhere on the tower's roof would be safe from her lash.

Loman backpedaled desperately, trying to interpose the bonfire at the center of the tower or the acolytes between himself and the diminutive demon, but Heila pressed forward with growing confidence. The Willow Whip responded to her will like an extension of her own arm, the supple wood bending and twisting in uncanny ways as it sought its target.

-CRACK- -CRACK-

The second strike caught Loman's shoulder, the willow wood wrapping partially around his arm before snapping back with enough force to tear through the fine fabric of his black robes and leave a bloody welt across his bicep, but Heila didn't even have to pull the whip all the way back to lash out again as the whip coiled like a striking snake in the air.

The third strike came from an entirely different angle, this time aiming at the hand that clutched his Bow of Stars. Loman hissed in pain but tightened his grip firmly on the mystical construct, even as blood flowed from a wound that wrapped all the way from the back of his hand around to his inner wrist.

Clearly, evading the demon's whip was impossible, so Loman raised his Bow of Stars again, loosing arrow after arrow at the advancing witch. But each luminous arrow either shattered harmlessly against her thornback-leather long coat or was deflected by the wide brim of her armored War Hat.

Worse, as Heila's fury mounted, a prickly aura began to radiate from both the witch and her armor, the very same protective energy that made Jacques's gift nearly untouchable to anyone but the diminutive witch for whom it had been made.

The thorny sensation crept across Loman's skin like thousands of tiny needles, pricking his flesh and making it increasingly difficult to maintain his focus. His enhanced vision, normally so precise in tracking opponents when he practiced under Exemplar Domas's guidance in the Holy City, began to falter as the unholy irritation clouded his concentration.

"Stand still, unholy demon!" Loman snapped through gritted teeth as another arrow went wide, his aim disrupted by the growing discomfort that seemed to seep into his very bones. His generally mild and graceful manner felt as frayed and raw as his flesh under the witch's demonic assault and her relentless capacity for torment.

If ever Loman had doubted that witches were creatures of malice and wickedness, his first encounter with one offered plenty of proof. She didn't even seem to be trying to claim his life, even as he fought back with every ounce of strength and faith he possessed.

Rather, she was toying with him in a wanton display of cruelty... and if he couldn't find a way to break through her defenses soon, the young disciple was afraid his body would succumb to her torment, even if his spirit never failed.

He could clad his heart in a radiant armor of faith that would never crack, he realized. But if she broke his body, all the faith in the world wouldn't matter, and from the cold gleam in the witch's eyes, she knew that just as well as he did!

Chapter 956: Whipped (Part Two)

The acolytes who had yet to succumb to Loman's sorcery stared in horror as the black-robed sorcerer fired several more arrows, none of which seemed to accomplish anything beyond shattering against the armored long coat the demon wore as she lashed out again and again with her wildly twisting and contorting whip.

Matthias, who had already watched seven of his fellows close their eyes forever, wanted nothing more than to flee from this place. The faith that had sustained him through the loss of Brother Usic and Brother Neso was strained and brittle when Brother Kevlis and Brother Haedar joined them, and by the time Brothers Tuun, Faun, and Marrit joined them, it felt like his heart had been pierced by seven arrows until what little was left of his faith began to drain away.

-CRACK- -CRACK- -CRACK-

Heila's assault on the beleaguered priest intensified as the Willow Whip found its rhythm. The living weapon seemed to adapt to Loman's amateurish attempts at evasion, striking from impossible angles as it bent and flexed beyond the natural limitations of a braided piece of willow.

A particularly vicious strike split his cheek and nearly reached his eye, sending him staggering backwards until the heels of his leather riding boots bumped into the edge of the stone rampart at the tower's edge.

Blood now flowed freely from nearly a dozen wounds across Loman's arms, chest, and legs. His black robes hung in tatters, and his breathing had grown ragged from both exhaustion and the constant pressure of avoiding the demonically agile whip.

But as Heila pressed her advantage, drawing closer to deliver what she hoped would be the blow that finally restrained the stubborn lord, Loman's desperation sharpened his focus to a razor's edge. In that moment of clarity, the stars glittering in his eyes guided his sight to something his previous attacks had missed.

Each time the demon witch advanced, the tails of her leather long coat fluttered around her legs, briefly exposing her unarmored upper thighs that were covered only by the thick fabric of her heavy breaches.

"Thank you," Loman whispered, giving his heartfelt praise to the Holy Lord of Light for revealing what he hadn't noticed as he drew his bow with trembling hands, the starlight arrow forming between his fingers brighter and more focused than any he'd fired at her before.

The luminous arrow streaked across the tower's roof with deadly precision and blinding speed. Heila tried to twist away, but the arrow found its mark, slicing through the gap in her armor to leave a burning gash along her thigh that sent waves of searing pain up her side and all the way down to her hoof.

"AAAAH!" Heila cried out, stumbling backward as she pressed one hand against the wound while her thorny aura flared even more intensely, forcing Loman to take several steps back before he could circle around the bonfire and use the warmth of the flames to blunt the impact of the witch's prickly defenses.

Heila's panic lasted only a moment, however, before the very same hand that had clutched her wound started fumbling in the inner pockets of her long coat, retrieving a half-empty bottle of dark green and ochre powder and spilling the remainder of its contents across her wound.

For a single, agonizing moment, it felt like Ipiktok was squeezing the wound with his massive fingers before a tingling numbness spread across the wound, taking the pain away and stopping the flow of blood from the wound.

"Don't you run from this," Heila said as her hooves rang out on the stones of the tower roof, chasing the fleeing priest who was trying to keep the blazing bonfire between the two of them. "You wanted to fight

to the last, so face me!" she shouted, unintentionally sounding more like Dame Sybyll than she'd ever imagined she would.

Despite his single successful shot, Loman's condition continued to deteriorate and he was never able to repeat his feat of penetrating the fluttering gaps in her armor. The thorny aura radiating from Heila's fury made his skin feel like it was crawling with insects, and the effort of maintaining both his enhanced senses and the glittering Bow of Stars was taking an increasingly visible toll.

"You cannot win this," Heila said through gritted teeth as she snapped her whip in front of the evasive priest, cutting off his avenue of retreat. "Look at yourself. You're bleeding from a dozen wounds, your hands are shaking, and you can barely stand. End this madness before it claims what's left of these men's lives."

For Matthias, hearing the demon witch plead for Disciple Loman to end this and spare their lives was the final straw that broke the faith of a man who had dedicated more than twenty long years to the service of the Holy Lord of Light. If this was what his Church demanded of him, to offer up his life to a 'miracle' that was only killing their own men, then he wanted no part of it.

"Help me!" Matthias cried as the demon's whip cracked out again, tearing through the fabric of Loman's robes and leaving another long, bloody gash across his chest. "Help us all," he amended. "We can't move from where we stand..."

"Matthias, no," a fellow acolyte named Oakil said, stretching out a feeble, frail hand that had been healthy and strong just hours ago. "You have to hold fast in your final moments. We've earned our place on the Heavenly Shores, but if you falter now, you'll wander the Dark Seas forever..."

"Believe in Disciple Loman," one of the youngest acolytes, a man named Paeril, called. "He fights for us all, even now, and he will save us from this demon witch!"

"No, please, can't you see?" Matthias said with tears streaming down his gaunt and sunken cheeks. "He isn't a holy man," he said, sinking to his knees as he finally understood what was really happening to them. "He's just another lord, using up our lives to fight his war..."

Heila and Loman both paused what had increasingly come to feel like a game of cat and mouse as she chased him around the perimeter of the tower, attempting to capture him with her whip. The young

priest seemed to have fallen into a cycle of searching for an opportunity to take a shot, praying for guidance to somehow turn the tide, and then dashing away when he failed to repeat his single, near miraculous success before repeating the process all over again.

Now, however, Mattias's heartfelt plea stopped them both cold in their tracks as they watched him struggling to cling to life while Loman's sorcery relentlessly drained what little he had left.

"Even if the others are willing to die for your madness and hatred," Heila said, glaring at Loman with grass-green eyes that had never been so cold. "At least release the man who is no longer willing!"

"It's too late for that," Loman said, as he gave the kneeling acolyte a forlorn look. "It was too late to change your mind the moment the prayer was said. Your lives belong to the Holy Lord of Light now," he said in much the same tones he would have used to tell an injured man that his wounds couldn't be healed. "I'm sorry, but the arrows will continue to fall until no demon lives within the walls of Hanrahan City, or until your faith can no longer support His divine miracle."

The arrow had been fired long ago... and the moment it was, the fates of every acolyte in Loman's quiver had been sealed. That was why it didn't matter whether or not he wanted to accept the diminutive demon's offer and surrender. Now that it had begun, even Loman himself couldn't stop the rain of luminous arrows blanketing the west gate plaza.

The most he could do would be to guide the storm of radiant arrows to other places in the town if the demons moved deeper into the city, but even that might have become impossible with so many of his 'arrows' now lying broken on the cold stones of the tower's roof.

"Don't you dare lie to me, Loman Lothian," Heila said as she stared at the dark-robed priest in disbelief. "Are you telling me that you did all this?" she said, gesturing with her free hand to the glowing lines and radiant points of the constellation on the roof. "Without being in control of it? Even now, you can't stop it from claiming the lives of your own people?"

"This is the way of the Ascended Archer," Loman said reverently. "When we raise up his Bow of Stars, we turn ourselves into arrows in the Holy Lord of Light's quiver, waiting only to be fired toward our fates. What has been done cannot be undone any more than an arrow in flight can return to the archer's hands," he said solemnly.

"You're wrong," Heila said flatly as she used her free hand to draw the Severing Knife from her belt. "Stay there and don't move," she commanded sharply, pointing at the Lothian lord with the dull blade. "Watch me save this man and then we'll talk about what can be done and undone," she said as she stalked across the roof to the kneeling acolyte.

"Don't worry," she told Mettias as she looked at him with soft, gentle eyes, speaking in the most reassuring tones she could manage. "You won't be the first human I save tonight," she said before her eyes flicked to the other acolytes. "And you won't be the last."

Chapter 957: Severing Fate (Part One)

Loman slumped against the stone ramparts at the edge of the tower, clutching his Bow of Stars in one hand while he struggled to draw breath. Part of him yearned to release the bow so he could use what little strength he had left to heal his wounds, but the rest of him shuddered at the notion of letting down his guard around a demon-witch.

It was already bad enough that he was tacitly allowing her to do whatever she wanted with the knife she'd drawn, but the truth was that he didn't think he could stop her, even if he tried to. Beyond that, two other thoughts warred in his heart. Even though it would be heretical, part of him genuinely hoped that the diminutive witch could save his acolytes and, by extension, the men who were suffering from the rain of luminous arrows in the west gate plaza.

Another part of him, a darker part of him that seemed to have grown larger the longer he struggled against the demons tonight, hoped that the witch would expose a vulnerability that he could take advantage of while she attempted to save the acolytes. It was that part of him, whether he admitted it or not, that clung the tightest to the Bow of Stars in his hand.

"They said your name was Matthias?" Heila asked gently as she knelt beside the drained and depleted acolyte who had begged for help. "My name is Heila," she said with a reassuring smile when he nodded. "I'm the Willow Witch, and even though I don't look much like it at the moment, I'm a much better healer than I am a warrior," she babbled as she withdrew a series of bottles from the pockets of her long coat.

"What, what are those?" Matthias asked as he eyed the bottles with a deeply furrowed brow. Unconsciously, he drew back slightly from the bottles as if they contained some kind of deadly toxin. After all, he'd spent more than twenty years listening to sermons that warned of the dangers posed by witches and the evil poisons they brewed in their cauldrons. Things capable of corrupting a man's heart and twisting his mind, in addition to plagues that could decimate entire villages.

"This one is for you to drink," Heila said, removing a stopper and offering the pale-faced acolyte a chance to sniff the contents. "You are very weak, and even if I cut you free of this ritual, the strain of freeing you may be more than you can bear. This will help to fortify your body with the strength of the Oak Tree," she explained.

"You don't have to drink it if you would prefer to face the danger without it," she offered, pulling back the vial that smelled of wood sap, acorns, and other warm and wholesome herbs that Matthias couldn't place. "But I promised I would save you, and your odds are better if you do."

She could have forced it, or she could have tricked him, and Heila wasn't above resorting to such methods with truly stubborn patients who refused to accept her help when it was necessary. She'd confronted that more than once when she tended to the injured who returned from the first raids on Hanrahan Barony.

But with Matthias and all of the other acolytes watching, and perhaps especially with Loman Lothian observing her every move, she hoped that gentle reasoning and pure honesty would take her further than any more forceful methods.

"I'll drink it," Matthias said, swallowing heavily and reaching out with a trembling hand to take the small porcelain bottle from Heila's fingers. "Do I, do I drink it all?"

"Swallow it all down, just like the medicine your mother gave you when you were little," Heila said, reaching out with her fingers to gently stroke his brittle and sweat-soaked hair. Loman's sorcery had taken so much from the poor man that he looked like a man in his fifties rather than one in his late thirties, and a man who had lived a life of hardship and struggle at that.

She had no idea if it was possible to give him back what Loman had stolen from him or not. Some things could only be healed with a great sacrifice, and she wasn't willing to make such a costly trade in order to restore one of Loman's victims, but she would do as much as she could.

"This one is revealing powder," Heila explained as she uncorked the next bottle she'd brought with her. "It's made from crushed gemstones from Airgead Mountain," she said as she poured the glittering dust into her palm before blowing gently over the dust, scattering it across the lines of starlight that ran between the acolytes who served as anchors for Loman's sorcery.

When she did so, dozens of faint lines appeared around each man, connecting to their hearts, their heads, and several other points all over their bodies. To Heila's trained eyes, even if it hadn't been obvious before that these men were caught in nets of stars that bound their lives to the ritual, this made it abundantly clear.

To the acolytes, it looked as if the witch had revealed a portion of the Holy Lord of Light's grand design, making it visible even to their unworthy eyes.

To Loman, however, it revealed patterns within the ritual that he hadn't seen since Exemplar Domas demonstrated the method of binding arrows to his quiver. Whenever the Exemplar made a move, all the lines connecting the countless stars of a ritual together were clear and bright, like an intricate map of the heavens. When Loman copied his grand designs, the results were too dim and pale to be seen... at least until now.

"What are you doing, demon?" Loman asked as he watched the diminutive witch tracing her fingers along the lines of starlight revealed by her gemdust. "That isn't something that you should..."

"Hush," Heila snapped, pointing at Loman with her Severing Knife without looking away from the delicate web of starlight. "Compared to the sorcery that powers your Holy Flame Blades, this isn't very complicated, but it's attached to five people who are still alive, and I won't risk their lives because you're disturbing me."

"You're a healer yourself, aren't you?" Heila asked as she finally turned her gaze on the wounded priest in his bloody, tattered robes. "You should know better than to disturb someone who is tending to a patient."

"I..." Loman started to protest, only to close his mouth with an audible click as Heila's hand strayed toward the hilt of her whip. There were questions he wanted to ask, particularly how she seemed to be so well informed about the nature of the Church's sacred Holy Flame Blades, but he wisely bit his tongue and allowed the witch to attempt what she had promised. Assuming he survived this night, there would be time for questions later.

Chapter 958: Severing Fate (Part Two)

Now that she could focus without distraction, Heila turned all of her attention to the glittering lines of the ritual that was even now consuming the lives of Loman's acolytes.

This wasn't her first time seeing the magic of Oracles, but it was the first time she'd had a chance to see it in a ritual that was simple enough to be understandable, and the differences between the magic of Oracles and the magic of Witches were shocking.

A witch's magic was a natural, living, breathing thing. It moved and flowed, twisted and bent. There were rules, yes, but very little was rigid. If you placed a boulder in a stream, the water would flow around it. Place enough boulders and you could transform a stream into a pond, or divert its course into a new direction, but even then, it was difficult to dictate the new course the stream would take, as water found its own paths of least resistance.

When she inspected Loman's ritual, however, there was none of the twisting, winding, loosely guided chaos that characterized much of witchcraft. Everything was fixed in place, like the stars in the heavens, connected by precise glittering lines and perfect arcs. There were no kinks in the flow of the energy, no points where it had to bend around something else or give way...

The magic of Oracles felt almost... Imperious. Arrogant. Vast and mysterious, resplendent in its perfection. At the same time, there was a distance to all of it, as if it looked down from high above and only deigned to influence the ordinary world if it was approached with reverence.

"Is this always how it was?" Heila wondered as she carefully inserted her Severing Knife in between the lines of starlight, carefully testing them before trying to cut anything. "Did the Church make it feel like this? Or did the Church change because their magic made them like this?" she muttered.

It was something that she would have to discuss with Ignatious when she returned to the Vale of Mists, but for now, it wasn't important. The important thing was to cut Matthias and his companions free of the ritual that bound them and then deal with the wounded Lothian lord.

"You don't really understand what you're doing, do you, Loman?" Heila asked, glancing over her shoulder at the priest in tattered robes who still clutched his Bow of Stars as if it were his most treasured possession. "You repeat the ritual exactly as you're taught, but you don't understand it at all... that's why it's so brittle."

"I understand the will of the Holy Lord of Light and His grand designs as well as any man can," Loman said with a frown. "It isn't for a servant of the Lord to question His designs; he need only carry out the Lord's will," he said as if he were reciting scripture.

"No wonder you don't know how to unmake what you've brought to life," Heila said with a frown. "If you'd had a real teacher, a good teacher like Auntie Amahle, you'd never do something like this. Whoever taught you sorcery wasn't kind to you or anyone in your church," she said as she returned her gaze to the withered man trapped by the bumbling priest's sorcery.

A bit of color had returned to Matthias's cheeks as Heila's potion fortified his body against the draining effects of the sorcery. A simple potion couldn't resist Loman's magic entirely, but now she believed that he had a fighting chance.

"I called this ritual brittle for a reason," she told Matthias, hoping she could bolster his confidence by explaining what was happening, but also hoping that she could convince the others to participate.

"I can break you free of this," Heila said confidently. "But when I do, the entire ritual will shatter. It will release everyone all at once because the threads that bind you together are so fragile, it'll be like cutting one strand of a spider's web. That's also where the danger is," she added as she swept her gaze over the remaining four acolytes.

"Just like cutting one thread on a spider's web, once the first strand is severed, the rest will blow away," she explained, looking each withered acolyte directly in the eyes in turn. "And if it brushes up against you or clings to you, you can get caught in what remains, even if I've cut Matthias free."

"You're saying that if you save him, it will kill the others?" Loman asked, furrowing his brow as he heard the demon's proposal. Now, it seemed, the truth was coming out. The witch offered salvation, but only for one man at the expense of sacrificing his fellows. It was exactly the kind of divisive, selfish manipulation that pitted one man against his neighbor that the Church had always warned the faithful about. "You might as well give Brother Matthias the knife to kill his own brothers with if..."

"Don't twist my words, you stupid, bumbling, amateur!" Heila snapped, interrupting the battered priest before his insidious words could trick the man she was trying to save into rejecting her help. "I swear that when this is over, I will personally bind you in vines and drag you to Ignatious to burn away your foolishness! This is what happens when you meddle in things you do not understand," she fumed.

"I'm trying to tell you that I can cut Matthias free, but the others will die for certain if they don't drink the same medicine he did," Heila said as she glowered at Loman. "But they've already pledged themselves to you, so they can reach your 'Heavenly Shores' when your ritual kills them, so I need you, Loman Lothian, to demonstrate that you have half the courage that Sir Carwyn did and order your men to accept my help, or all of them will die!"

Instantly, all eyes fell on Loman as the acolytes turned to the man who had led them through this entire crisis. He was battered, bloody, and his once awe-inspiring black and silver robes hung in tatters on his body, but none of the acolytes saw a man who was defeated.

Instead, they saw a man who defined 'meeting his struggle.' He was still holding his glittering Bow of Stars, ready to fight until the very last breath. He was still watching over them, even now that there was a demon witch in their midst. He hadn't forsaken them or his faith and he even spoke up when he felt the demon was leading them astray.

To the men of faith who had survived the harrowing ritual, Loman Lothian looked even more sacred and holy than he had when this all began.

"Paeril said it first," Acolyte Oakil said as he knelt on the cold stones of the tower's roof and bowed his head toward Loman. "I place my faith in you, Disciple Loman. I will die for you and the Holy Lord of Light if He requires my death," he said solemnly.

"I will die for you, Disciple Loman," Paeril said as he knelt on the ground. "Speak the words, and I will struggle to my last breath against this witch. I will not fail you."

"No, don't, please," Matthias pleaded as he looked at the reverent expressions on his companions' faces. "This isn't right. Isn't the most holy thing we could do right now to continue the struggle? The hardest thing we can do right now is to accept the help of a witch, isn't it? And if we receive her aid, we can struggle on for many years to come. Please.... Haven't enough of our friends died tonight? Why do you have to die too?"

In the end, it was Matthias's heartfelt plea, along with his reminder, that broke Loman's resistance. His vision had narrowed, he realized, when he picked up the Bow of Stars to kill his enemies, and as long as he held it, he struggled to think of anything beyond hunting down the demons that threatened his people until there were none left alive that could harm the faithful.

But there were many ways to meet a man's struggle in this life, and countless paths to the Heavenly Shores beyond death. Somehow, he'd forgotten that when the fog of war enveloped him.

"Accept her help," Loman said, letting the glittering Bow of Stars dissipate at last as he slumped to the cold stone roof. "Live to struggle on tomorrow, and the day after, and as many days after as we have left."

"She's right," he finally admitted with a deep, heavy sigh. "The battle is lost, and if we refuse to admit that, then we're turning away from the light of truth. Do what you must to save my people, witch," he said, looking at the withered acolytes with eyes that finally saw the toll this night had taken on them. "They will not resist your help," he promised.

Chapter 959: Sybyll Stalks Her Prey (Part One)

The sounds of armored boots on stone echoed through the eerily empty corridors of Hanrahan keep as Sybyll stalked toward the great hall. Her footsteps rang off the cold stone walls of corridors that should have been bustling with servants replacing spent torches, or carrying messages to the important guests of the evening's feast, but instead she found only abandoned hallways lit by guttering torches that no one had tended for hours, likely since she first rang the warning bell to herald her arrival.

Twice she glimpsed the hem of a servant's dress or the edge of a kitchen boy's tunic disappearing around distant corners as the keep's staff fled from the approaching Crimson Knight. Doors slammed shut in the distance, followed by the scraping of furniture being dragged across floors as terrified servants barricaded themselves into storage rooms and pantries.

The great hall where, just a few hours ago, the wealthiest and most influential people in town had gathered to welcome their 'salvation' from the demon raids, lay just ahead, and not even the ceremonial guard who should have been waiting outside the hall, ready to announce the arrival of distinguished guests, were present to bar her way.

It was far from the homecoming she wanted, and it had been like this ever since she shattered the heavy oak and wrought iron gates of the nearly century-old fortress. The people were afraid of the 'demon' at their gates when the person they should have feared all this time was the lord sitting on a throne above them and consigning them to lives of poverty and misery so he could fill his treasury.

Now that Sybyll had reached the heart of Ian Hanrahan's corruption, in the home that had once been her father's seat of power, she could see all the places where the pretender-baron had spent lavishly on

his own comforts even while his town fell into squalor and disrepair around him. Luxurious tapestries covered many of the walls, and she'd spotted at least two paintings or statues depicting Ian Hanrahan's 'heroic' figure in his youth just between the entrance to the keep and the great hall.

That spending had almost extended to the keep's defenders as well. There had been a sizable contingent of soldiers protecting the keep's outer gate, and Sybyll had spent more time than she would have liked subduing them.

It would have been easier if her miserly cousin had bothered to issue his men reasonable armor, she thought. Then she wouldn't have to work as hard to restrain herself to avoid killing the common soldiers who were too frightened of failing her cousin to flee, even when they had no chance of defeating her.

As is, several of those guardsmen had still suffered heavy injuries in the scuffle, some of which would haunt them for the rest of their days if they weren't able to receive healing from Lady Heila or one of the miracle workers of the Church.

"I owe that horned lass too much already," Sybyll muttered, shaking her head as she thought of the diminutive witch whom Lady Ashlynn had insisted she take on for this battle. Originally, Sybyll had asked Sir Ollie to join her. As Sir Thane's first student, she wanted the excuse to spend some time with the latest knight to learn from her mentor, and she was intrigued by the idea of fighting side by side with a witch-knight.

Lady Ashlynn had other plans, however, and she insisted that it was necessary to send her most experienced witch as a counter for anything Loman might do, as well as providing the most capable healer she had to care for the injured among her own forces.

Sybyll didn't know how capable of a healer Sir Ollie was, but what she'd seen so far from Heila was more than enough to prove that Lady Ashlynn had made the right decision. From saving Jalal to healing the wounded in the west gate plaza, she'd more than proven her capabilities.

Now, when Sybyll caught sight of the diminutive witch dancing on snow flurries through the air to reach Loman and put a stop to his rain of destruction, Sybyll had no doubts that she would prove every bit as capable of handling the Lothian lord as she had been with everything else.

While there was a part of her heart that yearned to tear Loman Lothian limb from limb for what he had done, the time that it had taken her to come this far helped her to cool her head enough to leave capturing the young priest entirely to Heila. The Lothian lord was important, and she wanted to see him suffer for what he had done, but Sybyll had her own goal tonight and Loman would only distract her from that.

When she reached to doors of the great hall, her hand struck out with inhuman speed and force, slapping into the wrought iron plate that held the door's heavy knocker with the intention of shattering the beam on the other side of the door that she was certain had been put in place by the soldiers who abandoned their ceremonial post outside the doors.

-CRACK-

The sound of splintering wood filled the air, but surprisingly, the doors held. There had been a subtle sound of scraping, however, accompanied by the sound of toppling chairs and crashing platters that made her realize that even the arrogant and wealthy guests of Ian Hanrahan's last banquet had enough sense to barricade themselves into the great hall instead of simply relying on the soldiers out front to stop her.

Dame Sybyll smiled as she raised her great axe with both hands, the darksteel blade gleaming in the torchlight, and swung it in a single, wide, devastating strike that ran parallel to the ground at the height of her chest. The axe tore through the thick iron plate like parchment as the impossibly keen edge of the darksteel axe parted wood, iron, and whatever lay beyond with equal ease.

-BOOM!- -CRACK!-

The impact sent a thunderous sound echoing through the entire keep as the hastily assembled barricade exploded inward. The doors burst from their hinges, taking chunks of the stone doorframe with them as they tumbled end over end down the length of the hall. Tables and benches that had been braced against the doors went flying, scattering debris across the assembled guests as heavy oak furniture crashed among them like the splinters of stone that had showered the defenders on the wall when the Tuscans unleashed their iron sling bullets at the walls.

Here and there, a startled guest cried out in pain as they were struck by a random piece of wood, stone, or scrap of iron, and one woman at the high table fainted dead away when a massive dining table, easily large enough to seat a dozen people, sailed clear to the back of the hall before smashing into the far wall with enough force to crack the ancient stones.

-CRASH-

The noise of the flying table falling to the ground shook the startled occupants of the great hall out of their stupor, freeing them from a moment of paralysis as many heads swiveled toward the hall's wide entryway. There, standing amidst the shattered ruins of the thick wooden doors and their improvised barricade, they found a nightmare torn straight from the pages of storybooks their mothers had read to them as children.

The Crimson Knight stalked through the doorway with a heavy -CHINK- -CHINK- sound of her armor shifting as she walked. Across her shoulders rested the haft of a wicked headsman's axe that was still wet with the blood of the men the axe had torn apart as easily as a woodsman would split dry kindling.

And in the place where her face should be, the faceplate of her helm displayed only the twisted visage of a grinning skull with sharpened, vampiric fangs ready to drink their blood.

Chapter 960: Sybyll Stalks Her Prey (Part Two)

"H-halt!" an aging guardsman said as he rushed to position himself between the guests and the terrifying figure in crimson armor who had just shattered the doors to the great hall. Only two of his companions stepped forward with him after seeing their barricade destroyed in a single blow, but the guardsman couldn't bring himself to look away from the skull-like visage of the Crimson Knight's visor long enough to berate his remaining men into joining him.

"Run!"

"Out of my way, wench!"

"Aaaaa!"

Chaos enveloped the great hall as several guests rushed toward the side door that servants used to bring food from the kitchens, pressing up against each other as they crowded into the narrow passageway. Some pushed and shoved, others bodily flung servants aside in their haste to reach what now looked like the only path to escaping this nightmare.

"DO. NOT. MOVE!" Sybyll shouted loudly enough for her voice to echo off the stone walls. "If even one of ye leaves this hall, I swear I'll put an end ta yer families by night's end. So all of ye can just stand right where ye are, an' answer me questions if ye wan' ta' survive this night."

Hearing Dame Sybyll's shouted command, everyone in the great hall froze where they were. Some stood stiff as statues with one leg still in the air as they dared not take even a single step toward the door they'd rushed for. Suddenly, in a single heartbeat, the hall had gone from the loud chaos of people scrambling to escape to the deathly silence of a tomb where some didn't dare to even breathe.

"Where is Ian Hanrahan?" Sybyll asked as she swept her gaze over the assembled elites of Hanrahan Town. She saw the wealthiest of merchants and their daughters, even a young lass who looked like the daughter of a knight, but there wasn't a trace of Ian Hanrahan or his son Bastian to be seen anywhere in the hall.

"He, um, that is, er, he..." the guardsman stammered, visibly shaking as he felt the shadow of death hovering over his shoulder. He wanted to answer, he wanted more than anything to say the words that would take this demon away from the great hall. But he couldn't. He couldn't put even three words together to say 'he's not here' under the intense pressure he felt from the blood-stained knight who filled the great hall with menace.

"Lord Loman had him arrested," an attractive young woman said from one of the tables near the front of the hall. Her companions were all cowering under the table, but she had believed to the very last moment that Lord Loman would come to her rescue or that he would protect them from the demons.

They had been able to see his luminous arrows sailing through the night sky to smite demons in the distance and even witness his duel with the strange snow demon as it approached the keep. It was only now, however, when the Crimson Knight herself stood among them that the woman realized Loman had been outmaneuvered. While he protected them from the demon-witch, the knight had taken advantage of the distraction to reach the great hall.

"Lord Loman gave him to Sir Dollin to guard," the woman said, trying to be helpful enough that the horrifying, demonic knight would leave. "Sir Dollin took the Lord Baron and his son, Bastian, to the guest rooms as prisoners," she said.

"Oh?" Sybyll said, raising an eyebrow behind her visor. "So he's a prisoner now. That's convenient. Who are ye girl? What's yer name?" Sybyll asked in the most neutral tone she could manage. The pain of her wounds still tormented her and she was starting to fear that she would never know peace again after

confronting Sir Tommin's Holy Light Blade but that didn't mean she had to take out her fury on the slip of a girl who had likely been dragged to this gathering as an offering from her father to one powerful man or another.

"M-my name?" the willowy woman said, stammering at last as the Crimson Knight focused on her. "I'm called Cossot, your, um, your ladyship," she said hesitantly, uncertain about how she was supposed to address the demon knight without offending her. "I'm a nobody, really," she said. "My father is..."

"Yer father isn't worth two snips if yer the one speakin' an' he's cowerin'," Sybyll snorted. "But yer a useful one. I'm fetching me cousin an' I'll drag his sorry arse back 'ere soon enough," Sybyll said. "Until then, Cossot, yer' in charge o' these folks. Keep them here, keep it orderly, an' be ready ta' tell me who they all are when I return."

"An' Cossot," Sybyll said at the pale-faced woman who was trembling in fright as she suddenly became the center of attention. "Ye have nottin' ta' fear from tha men in this hall," she said in her best attempt to be reassuring. "If any man lays a hand on ye that shouldn't, ye just tell me 'is name an' I'll see 'is hands removed from 'is arms fer tha' crime o' touchin ye," she said as she panned her gaze across the great hall.

"The days when tha' men o' Hanrahan can bully a woman just because they're stronger or richer are over," Sybyll declared as she glared at several of the noteworthy and wealthy men in the great hall, many of whom she knew as patrons of the town's brothels. "The sooner they learn that, the better!"

"Yes, your-your ladyship," Cossot said, dropping into the deepest, most reverent curtsy she could manage and nearly tipping over in the attempt to pay proper respects to the powerful demon who had chosen not only to spare her, but to take her into its service, at least for the moment.

Her heart hammered in her chest like the demon war drums beating outside the town, and for several breaths, she didn't dare to move, waiting for the dread Crimson Knight's permission before she did anything.

"It already left," Roseen whispered to her friend from the place she'd been hiding under the table. "You aren't bowing to anyone anymore."

"You! Shut up, you!" Cossot said, her face heating in embarrassment. "And get out of there! If I have to serve that demon, then you have to help me!"

"What? What did I do?" Roseen protested.

The two women's bickering finally broke the tension in the hall, at least enough for the frightened attendees to move again, but this time, none of them were willing to take even half a step toward the doors. The image of the fierce knight was just too overwhelming and there wasn't a single person among them who didn't understand that their bodies would present even less resistance to her powerful axe than the barricade had.

At the high table, a young girl, barely twelve years old, tugged at the sleeve of the young lady who had kept her close ever since the first warning bell sounded.

"Miss Rufina," Drema Quarrie asked hesitantly now that the Crimson Knight had left. "If she's here, do you think... do you think my father is... is..." she tried to ask, only for her voice to break in a half-stifled sob.

"I don't know," the elegantly dressed young woman said, holding tightly to the young lady's hand. "Sir Thorryn is a brave and strong knight but... if he had to fight the Crimson Knight, then he's probably..." she said hesitantly, finding herself every bit as unable to finish the statement as Sir Thorryn's young daughter had been.

At the same time, she wondered if Sir Niall was still alive, fighting out there in the west gate plaza. The arrows of light had ceased to fall from the sky, but she had no way of knowing if that meant the battle was over or not, and even less way of knowing what had happened to the knights who were fighting in the plaza.

All she knew was that the man who had asked her to accompany him for an evening of feasting had ridden off to face the most terrifying thing she'd ever seen while the Baron who lorded over their town cowered within his keep. And when she realized that, a slight smile started to form on her lips.

She wouldn't say that she loved Sir Niall, she'd only met him a few days ago, but she already knew that he was ten times the man Baron Ian Hanrahan would ever be. And somehow, the notion of the Crimson

Knight catching the cowardly Baron who had given her no shortage of lecherous looks even while she attended to Sir Niall... it didn't seem like the worst thing that would happen tonight.