

# The Vampire 961

## Chapter 961: Cousin's Reunion (Part One)

Sybyll swept through the corridors of Hanrahan Keep like a dark crimson wind. For all that it had been her father's home all his life, and her mother's home for many years, she saw no signs of Baron Brighton Hanrahan or her mother, the Baroness Caitlin.

Instead, as she moved through the hallways and past the tapestries and paintings that depicted the glories of old, she found only images of Ian Hanrahan or his father Aiden the usurper. Each time she passed a monument to the glory of either man, her axe lashed out, casually destroying hundreds of gold sovereigns worth of questionable art as she advanced on the guest rooms.

When she arrived, however, it was immediately obvious that Ian Hanrahan had fled long ago, perhaps before the first Tuscan launched one of their iron sling bullets at the walls of Hanrahan town.

"Ye didn'a believe they could defend yer home for even an hour," she snorted as she inspected the room that had been ransacked for anything that might be useful in an escape. "It won't save ye though, cousin," she said with a dark smile behind the grinning skull of her visor.

The inner structure of her family home might be unfamiliar to her, after all, she was already an exile in all but name by the time her mother gave birth, but that didn't mean she couldn't follow the traces that Ian, his son, and a knight had left behind when they fled toward the only path of escape still available to them.

Sybyll had learned more than just dancing in her years on Airgead Mountain and Jalal taught her to use each of her extraordinary senses to their fullest in order to find and stalk her prey. Just the scent of heavy perfume mixed with oily, greasy sweat that lingered in the air would have been enough for the vampire who had received Nyrielle's Potence of Blood to track down the fleeing baron, but he and his companions had left dozens of other minor traces behind in their haste to reach the 'safety' of the tunnels.

The trail led her to an opulent set of chambers where her cousin had spared little expense in 'updating' the personal quarters of Hanrahan Baron. Luxurious carpets imported from the old countries across the sea covered the floors, while the furnishings had been replaced with tables and chairs carved from exotic hardwoods from the heartlands of the Kingdom of Gaal.

"Wasteful idiot," Sybyll muttered as she strode toward the extra-large hearth that covered much of one wall in the sitting room. It took only a few moments of tracing her hand along the well worn stones of the hearth to find the hidden catch that transformed a narrow portion of the wall into a cleverly concealed door leading into a lightless spiral staircase that would eventually take her to the tunnels beneath the keep.

According to her mother, there were four ways into the tunnels hidden within the keep, and two exits. One of the tunnels led to the basement of a clerk's office outside the keep's walls, and had been intended to give the baron's family a method of slipping into town unobserved should they ever have a need to do so. It was the second tunnel, however, leading out beyond the town walls, that Ian Hanrahan had taken to escape, and Sybyll wasted no time in following his trail.

The darkness of the tunnel wrapped around her like a comforting blanket, bringing with it a measure of relief from the pain of the wounds inflicted by Sir Tommin's Holy Light Blade. The faint smell of smoke lingered in the dark tunnel, leading her through the passage that was barely wide enough for her armored figure to pass.

When she finally emerged from the tunnel, taking the stone steps leading upward two at a time, the space she emerged into smelled strongly of straw, horses, and underneath it, the scent of someone only recently slain.

"Captain Lusia," Sybyll called as she emerged from the tunnel into the dimly lit stable. "Did me cousin give ye any trouble?"

"No trouble at all, Dame Sybyll," the petite captain said, emerging from the darkness between two stalls with a wide smile on her delicate, mousy features. "I thought I could tease Rafal about earning one of their earrings for killing a metal man, but this one was old and feeble," she said, gesturing to the collapsed figure of an armored knight. A small, thin blade protruded from the slit in his visor as if it had become wedged in his helm when the aging Sir Dollin fell."

"Sir Dollin Halsall," Sybyll said as she inspected the crest on the man's tabard. She didn't know much about the man other than a vague impression that he had kept to the edges of the fighting during the War of Inches, arriving with 'reinforcements' once it was clear that the tide was turning toward victory.

She was certain that he boasted of several achievements in that war, but it seemed like he'd turned his knack for knowing which way the wind was blowing in battle into the sort of spineless service that would see him escorting Ian Hanrahan out of the keep even after Loman had ordered the portly lord's arrest.

"Tha world won'a miss him. Ye did well, Lusia," she praised, kneeling down to gently lay a hand on the petite scout's shoulder. Even if he was old, the layers of armor could have made him a significant threat to the unarmored Lightfoot scouts under Lusia's command, but she'd clearly handled him with precision that few could match.

"Now, where's me cousin?" Sybyll asked. "This reunion is long overdue."

"Just outside," Lusia said, waving for Sybyll to follow her. "He's tied up with his son. Poor boy, his father yelled at him constantly until we dragged them out into the snow and threatened to let them freeze to death if they weren't quiet. You'd think it was the boy's fault that your cousin was too fat and stupid to fight off my scouts."

Outside, more than a dozen Lightfoot scouts stood guard over the bound figures of Ian Hanrahan and his son Bastian. Both men had been tied like swine ready to be taken to market with their hands and feet secured behind them as they lay on their sides in the snow. Bastian looked like he'd fainted dead away at some point, but he was still clearly breathing and his body twitched occasionally as he shivered in the cold night air.

Ian Hanrahan, however, glared furiously at the scouts who held him captive, and his expensive doublet and breeches bore bloodstains from half a dozen minor wounds where one of the scouts had 'reminded' him that it was in his best interests to comply if he didn't want to share Sir Dollin's fate.

When Sybyll emerged from the stables, however, his face went pale and bloodless and his eyes grew wide in horror as the Crimson Knight finally arrived to claim his life.

"Hello, Cousin Ian," Sybyll said as she removed her darksteel helm, revealing her scarred, bone-white face and crimson hair to the man who had been responsible for her mother's death. "Do ye remember me?"

#### Chapter 962: Cousin's Reunion (Part Two)

"So it really is you," Ian Hanrahan spit as he stared up at the crimson-eyed woman glaring down at him. "Who do I thank for prettying-up your face? The Inquisitor, Diarmuid? Sit Tommin? Or did that Lothian brat actually manage to hurt the famed Crimson - Oof!"

Whatever Ian had been about to say was cut off sharply when Sybyll lashed out with an armored boot, kicking the hog-tied man in the gut hard enough to crack a few of his floating ribs and sending him into a pained coughing fit that only made him glare more fiercely at her.

"Useless all of them," he said once he could breathe again. "Inquisitor, Templar, Holy Disciple... none of them could do the least bit of good to stop you. So now what? You've come to kill me with that axe of yours?"

"Oh, ye'll die," Sybyll said. Her fists clenched tightly on the haft of her axe and there was a part of her that deeply wanted to swing that axe right now. A part of her that could still remember her helpless mother's voice shouting at her to run as far as she could to get away from this place and never return. A part of her who had listened to countless stories at her mother's knee about her father's hopes and dreams for Hanrahan once the War of Four Templars had ended and he could finally give back to his people for all of the hardship they had endured during the bitter years of war.

Sybyll had never known her father, but the stories she grew up on had left her with a deep yearning to return to the lands of her birth. She wanted to see the places her mother talked about so fondly and she wanted justice for what had been done to her father.

It wasn't until Aiden Hanrahan died that her mother was willing to bring her home to meet Ian. At the time, Sybyll had to promise, not just once but several times, that she wouldn't blame Ian for what his father had done and that she would treat him as family so they could live under the Hanrahan name openly again.

Again and again, Caitlin told her daughter that Ian had been too young when Brighton was murdered to have anything to do with it and she had to accept that. In the end, she had accepted it, and she'd foolishly believed that she could have the fairytale reunion with her cousin. That she would transform into one of the beautiful ladies of the march to be courted by a handsome knight... She could find the kind of happiness her mother had once found in the arms of a husband of her own.

But fairy tales were only stories, and Sybyll's life had been no fairy tale.

"Ye'll die, Cousin Ian," Sybyll said as she knelt down to look the pudgy lord directly in the eyes. "But not before ye confess yer crimes," she said. "Ye'll list them all out, and recite them good an' loud fer all yer people to hear. Not just what ye' did ta' me an' me mother," she added as a faintly pinkish tear slid down her scarred cheeks.

"No, ye'll tell tha' people all of it," she continued fiercely. "Every stolen sovereign, every cheated merchant, every deflowered maiden, every bribe ye took, every innocent ye had put ta' tha' sword..." she said in a voice that grew louder and louder with every word she said. "Ye'll spill it all out, every last bit of it for the whole world to hear. Ye'll tell them all how ye squeezed the life blood out o' our beloved Hanrahan...."

Armored boots scraped against the cobblestones beneath Sybyll's feet as she stood quickly, striding away from her cousin as the fury threatened to overwhelm her rapidly fraying restraint. She had to pace all the way to the back of the stables, lashing out with a fist and shattering a wooden stall before she could restrain her desire to pummel her cousin's putrid face until it was unrecognizable.

Even then, it wasn't until she stepped back into the pure, perfect darkness of the tunnel that she could begin regaining control of her rapidly beating heart and the fury that threatened to overwhelm her.

Just weeks ago, she was certain that she'd never have lost control like this, but the Reawakening of the Heart that Mistress Nyrielle had bestowed on her brought back all of the pain as well as all of the joy.

"You do not have to accept this gift before you claim your vengeance," Nyrielle had told her. "But if you are strong enough to face the wounds in your heart when you face Ian Hanrahan, then I think you will be a better ruler for your people afterwards."

"Ye never promised me an' 'afterwards' before, Mistress," Sybyll said. "I never dreamed of much beyond claiming his life wit' me own hands an' puttin' an end ta' is putrid line. It don'a matter much who rules after he dies, so long as I've put an end ta' him."

"I think you'll feel differently when you meet my darling Ashlynn," Nyrielle said with a cryptic smile and dark eyes that twinkled with mirth. "She has a way of making you yearn for 'afterwards' many times over. We didn't call you away from Airgead Mountain just to help her train or to claim your vengeance... we called you back so that you could claim your birthright."

"After all," Nyrielle said gently as she cupped the face of her fiercest progeny. "It wasn't just what he did to you and your mother that filled your heart with scars. So speak with Ashlynn, and let your heart begin to dream about what you could do for all those other people who have suffered under your cousin's rule if you were the one sitting atop the Hanrahan throne..."

Hearing a vampire talk about dreams was strange enough that Sybyll almost asked her Mistress to repeat herself, but she took the words seriously. Even if she couldn't truly dream, when she spoke to Lady Ashlynn about her hopes for what the Vale of Mists and the lands around it would become, she allowed herself to believe that it could be possible, and even to hope that she could be part of building the better future the young witch seemed to see so clearly.

But those days of shining hope only made the wounds that she and her people had suffered hurt even more. During the day, she was haunted by memories of her mother's last moments, or by the countless scenes of neglect and cruelty she'd witnessed each winter when she returned to her father's barony to move among his people and help them where she could.

Worst of all, however, was the guilt that clawed at her when she thought of all the things she'd let go of over the long years of exile as time ground away at her heart. She'd seen much, but acted on little because it might have provoked the Church or the Lothians or... or some kind of response that the people of Airgead Mountain couldn't endure.

She could only protect them at night, after all, and there were always people who died before she could find invaders on the mountain slopes. Now, the ghosts of the Soft Paws clan joined with the countless people of Hanrahan who had suffered under Ian's cruel rule, begging her from the darkness for the justice and the vengeance they were owed.

She had carried them in her heart all this way, and the distant drumming echoing across the valley now called them to the surface of her heart, eager to witness the final moments of the man who had profited for years off the raiders who pillaged their mountain home.

In the stables outside the tunnel, the dozen or so members of Captain Lusía's Lightfoot scouts made themselves as quiet as mice and twice as invisible as their commander struggled to restrain her fury. None of them were afraid that she would lash out at them. Even in the brief time that they'd served under her, they had all come to understand the fierceness with which their vampire commander protected innocents.

Rather, it was clear to all of them that she was consumed by hundreds of hurts, large and small, that had piled up on her over several decades, and during all of that time, she'd been unable to move against the man who was responsible for it. They couldn't imagine how that hatred must have gnawed away at such a powerful champion, but now that she finally had the man responsible for it within her reach, none of them wanted to intrude on this moment.

For several minutes, Sybyll stood in the darkness of the tunnel, allowing the demands of the dead to wash over her and promising them, along with herself, that Ian Hanrahan would meet his end soon... but not until his victims knew the fullest extent of his crimes. She owed them that much and a great deal more for making them wait so long when she had the strength to do something more.

When she finally returned to her hog-tied cousin, his gaze was still defiant, as if he had firmed up his resolve to deny her the confession that she so clearly wanted as a final, petty act of cruelty toward the woman whose life he'd destroyed so many years ago. Dame Sybyll, however, still had other means at her disposal.

"Hello, little cousin," she said as she knelt before the unconscious figure of Bastian Hanrahan, slapping him lightly across the face with the back of her darksteel gauntlet to rouse him from his slumber. "Wake up. It's time to see how much you know about your father's deeds..."

#### Chapter 963: The Aftermath of Battle

A strange wind swept through Hanrahan Town. It wasn't the bitter chill of Hauke's sorcery, but rather the accumulation of thousands of quiet whispers, pained groans, desperate pleas, and heartfelt prayers.

The town had fallen to demons. It wasn't a whispered rumor but a fact that was all but shouted from rooftops. Everyone heard it when the alarm bell at Hanrahan Keep rang out in a single, sonorous peal, just like the bell outside of town rang when the nightmare began. After that, the drums fell silent, and people anywhere near the fighting at the west gate plaza opened their shutters to peer into the night, praying for a miracle.

The miracle never came. Instead, the demon army quickly organized itself before marching through the streets of Hanrahan Town. But once the army began to move, the rumors started to flow...

"Saw 'em wit' me' own eyes, I did," one man swore as he clutched at the tankard of ale he'd rushed to buy as soon as the demon army passed by his home. "Taller an' me house, wit' eyes that burn like flames an' giant tusks like scythes that can impale ten men! They's real giants, they is, an' they're breakin' up in groups ta' guard tha gates."

"Yer sayin' we're trapped here? Tha' demons have tha' gates?" a nearby man asked.

"I'm sayin' those giants can scoop ye up an' swallow ye' whole," the first man replied. "If tha demons don'a just cleave ye in two wit' those claws o' theirs..."

Meanwhile, in a home that sat on the top floor of a building half way between the west gate plaza and Hanrahan keep, a sandy haired man pulled his wife close under the blankets of the bed they shared, though his shivers had nothing to do with the winter cold he'd just returned from.

"Ye were right, Gladdys," he said as he shivered. "It were demons on tha' rooftop. I saw tha' hoof prints in tha' snow, clear as day. There must'a been three, maybe even four of 'em. One of 'em must'a stomped on tha cracked beam in tha' pantry. Come mornin', we hafta clear it all out or any bit of melt will leak right on'ta tha' barley an' flour. I'll close up early tomorrow ta' patch tha' roof b'fore sunset," he promised, as if patching a hole left in their roof by a demon was the most ordinary thing in the world.

"Danny," the man's wife said as she wrapped herself around her husband's shivering body. He tried to be a good man and he talked like they'd just go on as usual, clearing out the pantry, patching up the roof, even opening up the shop, as if anyone would want to come buy tools the day after demons sacked their town.

"Why don't we just pack it all up," Gladdys suggested. "We can pick out everything that's important and food enough for a few days ride to Lothian City. My father always said you could come work for him any time, and my mother wants to be close to her grandchildren when we have them... don't you think we should leave now, before it gets even worse?"

"I love ye, lass," Danny said as he gave his wife the most reassuring squeeze he could manage. "But we can't go runnin', not t'morrow. Ye have'na lived here long enough ta' know how it all works out here. Tha folks livin' by tha' market plaza will buy up all tha' horses an' wagons by an hour past dawn," he said confidently. "At prices five times what they're worth too," he added with a trace of bitterness in his voice.

"I know I promised I'd care fer ye," he said, rolling over in bed to gently cup her cheek and staring into her watery green eyes. "An' I will. I promise ye' that. If I have ta' fight a demon off wit' a garden rake, I'll do it ta' keep ye safe. But ye know me pockets aren't deep enough ta' outbid a whitesmith or a vintner fer a horse an' wagon. An' wit' tha' early snow, we can't spend two or three days on tha' road ta' see yer parents," he said, stroking her hair and hoping she would understand.



"We got'a make it work here, loveling," he said, doing his best to sound confident even though he had no idea how he was supposed to do that now that demons had taken their town. "One way or tha' other, we got'a make it work..."

Elsewhere, closer to the keep itself, in a sitting room of a weaver who had bemoaned his lack of invitation to the Baron's banquet just hours ago, several women from the prosperous neighborhood shared even more shocking rumors over wine.

"I'm telling you, it was him," a matronly woman approaching her fifth decade said confidently. "Even in the demon light, you could make out his face clear as day. Lord Hugo was marching with the demons!"

"Not just marching," another woman added as her hands clutched at the long strand of polished beads she wore around her neck, slowly pulling the necklace through her fingers one bead at a time, though she seemed unaware of the nervous habit. "I saw him too, with another young lord beside him, but Lord Hugo was giving orders and the demons were listening."

"I always thought he'd have been a better baron than Lord Bastian," a third woman said. "There's not one arrogant bone in his body, and he asked sharp questions when he sat in judgment. I really hoped things would get better once he took the throne, but his father snatched it away from him as soon as Lord Bastian healed from his fall."

"Do you think that's why Lord Hugo went to the demons?" another woman asked. "Because Baron Ian made Bastian his heir again? I know I'd be upset if my father had snatched away my dowry to help my sister get married before I did..."

"Watch your words!" the matronly woman snapped when she saw several of her friends beginning to nod along in agreement. "No matter how much Lord Hugo was done wrong, there's never an excuse to go running to the demons and bring an army to attack our homes," she pronounced, as if that was the final word on the matter.

"But what if," one of the younger ladies said hesitantly. "What if Lord Hugo is going to take the throne with his demon army? It seems to me like even the Crimson Knight does his bidding, so if he wants the throne... can anyone stop him from taking it?"

Chapter 964: Clash At The Temple Gates

At the Temple of the Holy Lord of Light, voices were raised in far more than whispers as several acolytes and a handful of men from the local Temple Guard stood shoulder to shoulder, blocking the gates of the temple while Head Priest Germot stood outside, shouting at bloodied and battered soldiers from the division of the Temple Guard who fought in the plaza.

"I don't care if your orders come from Lord Hugo or Inquisitor Diarmuid," Germot shouted. His face was so red that it had nearly turned purple, and spit flew from his lips as he stabbed a finger into the wounded guardsman's chest. "These men have been touched by witchcraft and they will not defile this sacred Temple!"

"But your worship," the guard protested. "Even if we've been touched by witchcraft, it's not like anyone asked the witch to save us! We were all hurt, some of us dying when the healing rain fell from the sky. We aren't heretics!"

"It doesn't matter if you asked for it or not," Germot countered. "You are unclean and unworthy. Don't think I don't see how you were injured," he added as he swept his gaze over the assembled group of wounded soldiers. Some had been archers on the wall, others were part of Sir Thorryn or Sir Niall's group, but most were members of the Temple Guard or the Lothian soldiers who had fought directly against the demons with iron tusks.

"I can still feel the judgment of the Holy Lord of Light on you," Germot declared. "When his divine arrows rained down from the sky, they struck you! If ever I needed proof that you were unholy men who had already given yourselves over to heresy in your hearts, the wounds on your body are proof enough to see you brought before the Inquisition!"

"But Inquisitor Diarmuid..."

"I DON'T CARE!" the Head Priest shouted, slamming his ceremonial staff onto the cobblestones and clutching it so tightly that the guardsman flinched back, afraid that the priest would take a swing at him. "If the witch can heal your men, then take your men to her! You said she went to the keep? Then go to the keep and beg the witch for help. But you and your men won't set one foot in these sacred walls!"

Behind the head priest, there was a chorus of approval from the acolytes, echoing the sentiments of the man who had led their temple for more than a decade. If the injured men had already been struck down by the Holy Lord of Light then there was no reason to acknowledge them further.

As far as the men of the temple were concerned, the Holy Lord of Light had already marked the soldiers for death. Any aid they offered to the wounded men wouldn't just be a form of heresy, it would be open defiance of their Lord's will!

"Fine," the guardsman spat. "If you won't do what's right, then I'll bring the men to see Inquisitor Diarmuid at the keep. But mark my words, Priest," the guard said, raising his gauntleted fist and pointing at the blustering priest. "When the Inquisition learns that you turned away wounded men because you are afraid to face the taint of a witch, they're sure to come calling for you. Don't think that you won't be judged for this!"

"The only judgment that matters is His divine will," Germot countered, refusing to be threatened, or worse, corrected about his interpretation of scripture, by a mere soldier simply because the man wore the tabard of the Church. "Since we have seen his will thwarted by the demon witch, we will pray for your journey to the next life, because the Heavenly Shores will not receive you after this one!"

As much as the guardsman wanted to argue, to plead for a space to settle the wounded within the Temple grounds so the acolytes could tend to his men and the other injured soldiers from the battle, he realized that there would be no convincing the arrogant, stubborn Head Priest.

Germot hadn't come anywhere near danger the entire night. He had no idea what that horrifying battle had been like. He didn't know what it felt like to have his flesh pierced by a luminous arrow from the heavens while he was locked shield-to-shield with one of the iron-tusked demons.

The Head Priest didn't know what it felt like to be struck down by the Holy Lord of Light when he thought he was doing the Lord's will and resisting the demons, and he didn't know what it sounded like to have his ears filled with the sounds of his friends screaming in pain before they died.

But more than anything, he didn't know what it felt like to be lying in the snow, bleeding to death while the rain of holy arrows fell, only to be rescued by the heretical magic of a witch. The Head Priest could never imagine the feelings that enveloped the Temple Guard as the demons who had been fighting them just moments before rushed out from under their protective dome to drag their injured foes to safety, or to hear an Inquisitor admit that his powers were too feeble to turn the tide in the battle they'd lost.

Head Priest Germot would never understand the turmoil in the hearts of the men he turned away because he couldn't imagine the things they had been through in the pitched battle on the walls and in the plaza... Nor would he ever understand that it wasn't the enticement of a witch's healing that turned

these men away from the Church and the Holy Lord of Light, but his own words of rejection at the gates that had broken their faith.

Because without the ability to take refuge in the warm glow of the Church, the only thing left to these men was to hope that the demons would continue to be kinder to them than their own masters were...

In the wake of the thunderous confrontation at the Temple gates, even more whispers flowed through the town.

The mighty Templar, Sir Tommin, had fallen and had to be carried through town on a litter as he wept...

A powerful witch had saved the lives of many men, healing humans and demons alike with her witchcraft in exchange for binding them to serve her for the rest of their lives...

The men who fought in the west gate plaza had all been cursed by the demons and ill fortune would haunt anyone who offered them help for the rest of their lives...

Each rumor seemed more outlandish than the one before it, but just after midnight, something more substantial than rumors began to spread across town as dozens of soldiers and pages presented themselves to dozens of homes across the town.

From the clerks who calculated the tithes paid by merchants in the town to the constable and his deputies, anyone who served the Hanrahan family to administer to their vast territory received a late-night visitor, but the visitors didn't stop with minor officials. Many people of means and influence received a visit, including Head Priest Germot, but also the Head Madame of the Slow Flame brothel.

The message that they each received was the same, and no one dared to ignore it.

~Dame Sybyll Hanrahan, daughter of Baron Brighton Hanrahan, summons you to her keep to hear the crimes of Ian Hanrahan and witness her judgment.~

Chapter 965: A Busy Night (Part One)

The nights of winter were long and cold but no night had ever felt as long as the night when Hanrahan Town fell to demons. The attack had begun shortly after sunset, and after the slow, inexorable march of the demon army, the battle itself had lasted less than an hour.

For the people of Hanrahan, especially for those who had already gathered at Hanrahan Keep, the speed of it all hit them even harder than the fall itself. Their strong town walls, unbreached in a hundred years, had delayed the demon giants and the wolf demons for a handful of minutes. The mighty gatehouse with its double gates and reinforced portcullis had fallen to a pair of witches even faster, and not even an Inquisitor had been able to stop them from doing it.

Maybe it wouldn't have felt as devastating if they hadn't been given hope just before the battle began. A Templar bearing a Holy Light Blade stood forth to personally lead the defenders of Hanrahan in battle and the Disciple of an Exemplar called on the power of the stars above to smite the enemies of the Holy Lord of Light.

Hanrahan Town had never enjoyed such strong defenders... but even they had been helpless before the army of the Crimson Knight. Between the ringing of the alarm bell and the fall of Hanrahan Keep felt like an eternity, but it had only been two hours, leaving much of the night still to unfold.

Dame Sybyll's forces moved quickly to seize control of the town and the keep in that time. Hugo Hanrahan knew the defenses of his hometown with the precision of a scholar who had long ago committed maps to memory. He sent Tuscan giants to watch over not only the town's two great gates, but the smaller gates and access points as well.

Even the culverts where streams flowed through the town on their way to the lake saw groups of Golden Eyed skirmishers and heavily armored Iron Tusked soldiers stationed nearby to prevent people from escaping the town in the dark of night by wading through the water.

Hugo might never have drawn the blade that Lord Jalal gave him before the battle began, but once it ended, he spent hours moving between groups of soldiers, often rushing to speak to townsfolk before those who had fortified themselves with liquid courage could attempt something foolish like storming the gates with a disorganized mob.

"Go home!" Hugo shouted at the third crowd to gather at one of the town's smaller gates tonight. The 'Jewel Gate' wasn't anything glamorous, quite the opposite. It was the closest gate to Gwennan's Jewel, and even in the depths of winter, the smell of fish guts and carcasses never faded from the small plaza where fishermen sold the catch they brought in from the deep lake just beyond the walls.

"I know that you're all frightened," Hugo said patiently. "I was frightened too when I met the Eldritch. But look at me," he said, flinging his arms out wide. "I've camped with them, spoken with them, even feasted with them and I'm still hale and whole. You have nothing to fear from these soldiers," he said as he rested a hand on the shoulder of a Golden Eyed warrior with dull brown fur and three small rings in one of his tufted ears.

"We don't want no trouble, Lord Hugo," a scrawny man with a nose that looked like it had been broken more than once said from the head of the mob. His face was red and flush from too much drink and the stench of cheap ale clung to him like a second cloak in the crisp winter air. "Some o' these lads just wanna go fer a walk along tha water an' a bit o' late night fishin' ta' calm themselves down," he said, raising slender fishing pole in one hand.

"Yeah!" the crowd behind their scrawny spokesman cried.

"We just want to go fer a walk!" someone shouted from far in the back of the crowd.

"A man's got a right ta' roam, ye know," another man said, though he wasn't brave enough to step out from the crowd to join their spokesman at the front.

"You're not going fishing," Hugo said, shaking his head at the mob. "If you were going fishing, you'd have brought nets and buckets," he pointed out. While a few other men had gathered up fishing poles, they clutched them more like they were clubs than anything else and they looked like they were ready to stir up trouble if they thought they could get away with it.

"Look, I'll give you two choices," Hugo said patiently as he fished in the pouches under his cloak, retrieving a coin that gleamed with a pale yellow shine in the flickering torchlight of the small plaza. "Gill's Gulp is half a block away from here," he said, mentioning the nearest alehouse where he was certain that half of these men had just been drinking.

"If you all follow me back there, then you can drink all night till my coin runs out," he said, holding a gold sovereign up high. The single coin was enough to buy at least a few kegs of ale, and even if every man here drank until they pissed themselves, they still wouldn't run out the tab the hawk-nosed lord was offering to pay.

Hugo hardly minded the excess though. He might not have much gold in his purse, but if the few coins he had could buy a reprieve from the violence and bloodshed of the night so far, then he'd spend it gladly. Because in his mind, one thing was certain. If even one of these mobs of unruly men started trouble, the trouble would spread like wildfire through the town and he couldn't bear to see that happen.

"Or, you can fight this out the Eldritch way," he said as he thought back to Sir Ollie's fight with Sir Rain the day after they'd arrived in the Vale of Mists. "You can come up one at a time to scrap with my friend here... bare hands," he added quickly. "No one's getting killed tonight. If you can beat my friend in a fair fight, then you can take as long a walk out the gate as you want to," he said.

Next to him, the lupine soldier grinned, showing his long row of sharp teeth while he flexed his claws, cracking his knuckles while his tail swished back and forth in eagerness. Clearly, he hadn't run out of fight after the brief battle on the walls and he was more than ready to prove to these drunken humans just how bad of an idea 'scrapping' with him would be.

"Yer, um, yer lordship," the scrawny man said, looking as if the combination of the toothy grin and Hugo's offer had finally accomplished what common sense and cold night air couldn't. "I think... I think we're better off drinkin' on yer coin than scrappin' wit' yer 'friend' here," he said, looking sheepish and embarrassed as he tucked his fishing rod behind his back.

"Wise move," Hugo said as he strode forward to wrap around the shoulders of the man who already smelled strongly of cheap ale. "Come, let me buy you all a drink!"

The townsfolk seemed excited to have one of their lords joining them in the crowded, smelly alehouse and many of them invited the young lord to stay and drink with them until they could all forget that demons had come to assault their town.

There was a part of Hugo that wanted to do exactly that. To crawl into a bottle along with the townsfolk and forget the fact that his cousin, Sybyll had likely captured his father by now. If the old man had put up any kind of a fight or if he'd provoked her temper, he might even be dead already.

For all the abuses he'd suffered from the man over the years, Ian Hanrahan was still his father, and now that the moment was nearly upon him, Hugo found it harder than he'd imagined to face his father's impending demise.

The old man was guilty of countless crimes, and he'd never once been a 'good' father to Hugo, but he'd at least paid for Hugo's mother to live a comfortable life in Keating Duchy. He'd also supported his bastard son with a stipend that most commoners would envy, even if it was a pittance compared to what his older brother received.

Of course, Hugo had no illusions that his father cared for him. At best, he was supported as a 'spare heir,' a backup who was only acknowledged when Bastian was badly injured. Ian didn't love his bastard son. He treated him like a spare horse for a cart, well fed and sheltered but otherwise unloved. It was a weak and feeble attachment, and Hugo shouldn't have felt any reluctance now that his father was about to die, and yet...

But as much as he wanted to stay in the crowded alehouse and drink until he couldn't even remember the old man's name, he refused to be that sort of lord. His cousin, Sybyll, had revealed more care for this barony and its people in a few days than he'd seen from his father in as many years and for the first time, Hugo felt like he had a chance to do something that really mattered.

He might be helping a vampire to seize the throne his father once held, but after everything he'd seen, that hardly mattered to the young Hanrahan lord. What mattered was that the people in town were afraid, and he was one of the few people who could truly offer them reassurance and comfort in the midst of the greatest crisis of their lives.

And as long as that was true, he had work to do...

#### Chapter 966: A Busy Night (Part Two)

At the same time that Hugo was taking charge of securing the town itself, a train of carts and wagons emerged from the wilderness, bringing with it the servants and attendants who accompanied the Second Army and all of the supplies they had brought to assist Dame Sybyll in recapturing her home.

Under Heila's watchful eye, they transformed the bailey of Hanrahan Keep into a tent city, starting with large tents placed as close to the baron's grove of fruit trees as she could set them before filling the tents with folding wood and leather cots to keep the wounded up off the cold ground.

Heila might have cursed and sworn a bit when the wounded soldiers from the Temple Guard and the Lothian army limped into the tent city. Emmie swore that she heard her lady muttering about taking a lash to the priests at the temple who turned wounded men away. Still, she made space for them



nonetheless, ordering more cots to be brought out and thick blankets to lay on the ground in makeshift beds if they ran out of cots to lay the injured on.

In the middle of what felt like endless rows of cots filled with wounded soldiers, a strangely well-dressed figure knelt down next to a man from the Temple Guard, reaching out with practiced fingers to unfasten the straps of the injured man's armor.

"Lord, Lord Liam?" the soldier asked, blinking in surprise as he vaguely recognized the man tending to him. "What are you doing here?"

"Right now, I'm tending to you," he said as he pulled the padded gambeson aside and lifted the torn and bloodstained tunic to reveal a side that was a mass of bruises and a long, ragged cut that was studded with bits of broken chain links. Only the strength of the man's armor and the blessing of Heila's magic had preserved the man's life, but the wound was still one of the more frightening ones he'd seen tonight.

"One of the Iron Tusk Clan got you with an axe, didn't he?" Liam said as he carefully inspected the wound. The young lord was no stranger to the healer's tent; he'd spent plenty of time in one visiting his injured men while Lord Loman tended the wounded during the summer campaign, and even landed there himself a time or two during his first campaigns against the Eldritch.

Only, this was the first time he'd ever found himself doing more for the wounded than applying a hasty bandage on the battlefield, and he was rapidly coming to possess a new respect for the work done by the healers who fought against a very different enemy within the four canvas walls of their tents.

"Two of 'em at once, your lordship," the guardsman said, wincing in pain as Liam probed at the wound, checking to see if the wound that had been sealed by Lady Heila's witchcraft had reopened since the soldier left the west gate plaza. Marching from the plaza to the Temple at the center of town had already put an incredible strain on the bodies of the injured, but to be forced to march yet again, this time all the way to Hanrahan keep, was more than many of the men could bear.

Already, Liam had seen several wounds reopened, and they'd been forced to summon Lady Heila to save the life of a man who had bled so much that the tabard stuffed into his wound dripped like a sodden towel by the time he arrived.

"You're lucky your armor took as much as it did," Liam said before he stood up, searching among the figures moving about the wounded for the shortest, smallest one in the room. "Squire Emmie," Liam called. "Can you come take a look at this man with me? I don't know if the unguent you gave me will be enough for a wound this large..."

Once the tents had gone up and Lady Heila had seen to the worst of the injured, she'd withdrawn into the small grove of trees to rest and recover from everything she'd done in the course of the battle. When she did, she put her squire in charge of tending to the wounded using the vast reserves of potions, salves, and remedies she'd prepared before the battle began.

When Emmie asked what she should do with the human lord she was supposed to be watching over, her teacher's answer was four simple words. "Put him to work."

At first, Emmie was afraid that the puffed-up human lord would be useless in the healer's tent and that he'd only get in the way, but Liam Dunn was slowly proving her wrong. He had a soldier's understanding of battle and injuries, he was adept at helping even badly injured men out of torn and broken armor, and he knew enough about wounds to know the difference between something that needed a healer's attention and something that needed several days of bed rest and a diet of thick broth or thin porridge.

"Oh, that is bad," Emmie said, startling the injured guardsman when the 'squire' Lord Liam called for turned out to be a horned demon who looked startlingly young, given her diminutive stature. "The bones may be broken under the bruises," she said as she inspected the wound. "And there are bits of metal lodged in the wound because no one took them out before Lady Heila healed everyone."

"Ha ha ha," the soldier chuckled as he heard the childish voice's very serious pronouncement. "So is that it? I'm dead after all? Just when I thought I'd convert to worshiping a tiny horned pagan goddess," he joked.

"Don't worship her, she won't like that," Emmie said firmly while she dug in the pouch at her waist for a small, sharp knife and a pair of iron tweezers. "Here," she said, presenting the tools to Liam. "You just need to cut the skin enough to pull out the bits of metal, and then you can rub the unguent on it. It should be fine then," she said before turning to look at the disbelieving face of the wounded soldier.

"We don't have much Sweet Sleep," she said, referring to a potion that Lady Heila said could allow even people who had lost a limb, like Lord Jalal, to sleep peacefully through the night. "So you'll have to be brave and tough it out tonight. But I promise, you'll have a good scar from this," she said, as though it was the most important part of the healing process. "All the women who see it will know how strong

and brave you were and your name will echo off the walls when people hear how hard to kill you are, so hang in there tonight and think about the fame you'll have when this is all over," she said before patting him gently on the shoulder and heading off to see the next patient.

"Lord Liam," the soldier asked, his wound temporarily forgotten as he stared at the strange, horned girl. "Did that just happen? Or am I dying and this is all just a dream before I reach the Heavenly Shores?"

"It's not a dream," Liam said, shaking his head while he fetched a stool so he could sit next to the man and cut the broken bits of armor out of his wound. "Her father is some kind of hero to the Eldritch across the mountains. He fights in front of crowds for spectacle and entertainment. You probably saw him fighting one against two against the Templars during the battle."

"I don't pretend to understand them," Liam admitted to the incredulous soldier. "A few days as their captive isn't enough to come close to understanding them. But if I've learned one thing after all of this, it's that I never want to be their enemy again," he said firmly as he took up the small knife and the iron tweezers.

Whether Lady Heila intended this to be another of her 'lessons' for him or not, Liam was getting an up close and personal look at exactly what Lady Ashlynn's army was capable of doing to the knights and soldiers of the Dunn Barony, and the young lord shuddered to think what would happen if a man like Emmie's father, Kurtz, was ever set loose on the field of battle to crush the only 'worthy opponents' for a Champion of the Arena.

Liam thought he understood the Eldritch. He thought that he was ready to lead the Dunn Barony to glory in the Holy War to come and that one day, he or his father would become the first Count Dunn, serving under the first Lothian Duke.

After tonight, he no longer harbored any such delusions. As soon as he was allowed to return home, he intended to do whatever it took to convince his father to accept Lady Ashlynn's offer of an alliance as her vassal. The alternative would be to share the fate of Hanrahan Barony, and Liam had no doubt that there were plenty of strong, capable warriors like Kurtz whom she could place atop a throne if she wished.

Soon, he knew he would bear witness to the execution of a baron who would never submit to Eldritch rule... one who wouldn't even be given the chance to submit. Once, he thought that witnessing such a thing would galvanize his resolve to fight back and defend his people against the 'murderous demons.'

But now that the moment was upon him, all he could think about was how to prevent this kind of tragedy from playing out in his own hometown, and how he could save his father from the fate that Ian Hanrahan was about to suffer...

#### Chapter 967: In The Court Of The Crimson Knight (Part One)

In the span of a few hours, the servants who accompanied the Second Army from the ancient fortress in the Vale of Mists had transformed the great hall entirely.

On the far wall, behind the gilded throne that bore the Hanrahan coat of arms, old banners had been pulled down and new ones hung in their place. As dozens of invited guests shuffled into the hall, many of them stopped to stare, pointing at the strange configuration of banners on the wall.

For the Hanrahan banner to still occupy the central, most prominent spot in the hall would have been surprising following the town's conquest by demons, were it not for the announcement they had all received that they had fallen, not just to demons, but to an alleged child of Baron Brighton Hanrahan. Now, the banner displaying the woodsman's axe opposite the farmer's scythe offered a kind of comfort and normalcy in the midst of so much turbulent change.

The space above the Hanrahan banner, however, where the Lothian Setting Sun and Crossed Axes once hung, now displayed two banners, as if the new ruler of Hanrahan served two liege lords. The silver bordered banner of blue and green with its tree and flowers at least followed customs that the people could recognize, even if they weren't familiar with it.

The black banner, however, that featured a red axe blade and feathered wing, was one that every child in Lothian March had learned to fear in nursery rhymes about the Demon Lady of the Vale. Seeing it flying here, and atop the Hanrahan coat of arms at that, made it clear where their new Lady's loyalties lay.

"Look," a prosperous baker said, nudging the miller he'd sat next to during the feast with an elbow and pointing to the far wall. "Lord Hugo's banner hasn't moved," he said as he pointed to the banner of a quill pen crossed with a scroll of parchment over the three rolling hills of Hanrahan Barony. "But they pulled down Lord Bastian's..."

"An' hung a demon banner in its place," the miller said as he stared at the banner displaying the paw print and stars of the Demon Lord of Airgead mountain. "Why's it hung like a vassal? Did Lady Sybyll conquer the cats while we wasn't watchin'?"

"It's 'Dame Sybyll'," Cossot corrected as she came to guide the men to their seats. The young woman looked like she was barely holding it together as she found herself launched into the role of some kind of attendant, but she'd received clear instructions, both from Dame Sybyll herself and from the horned and bearish servants who came to redecorate the great hall for the evening, and she wasn't about to make any mistakes.

"Dame Sybyll says that she will take a new title when her Mistress grants her one and not until then," she repeated for what felt like the twentieth time or more. "If you have to speak to her tonight, address her like you would any other knight... but unless you're willing to wager your head that you won't offend her, it's best to keep your mouth shut."

"She, she wouldn't really cut off a man's head... would she?" the baker asked as he took his seat. He hoped the young lady was teasing them, but when he looked into her tired eyes and saw the grim set of her jaw, he decided he didn't want to hear the answer to his question and took his seat in silence instead.

The tables had all been removed in order to add as many rows of benches as possible. When it came to actual seating, however, there was a clear divide in the sections. To one side sat the officers of Sybyll's army, along with their seconds, or in some cases their successors. People from half a dozen different clans were all sitting shoulder to shoulder and occupying the front two rows of one side of the hall.

But the rest of the hall, filled with wealthy merchants, knights and their families, representatives from the church, officials and administrators of the barony... They filled all of the remaining seats in the hall, giving the impression that there was about to be a grand wedding, and the bride's side of the family had barely sent anyone to fill up their side of the hall.

Most of the visitors, kept awake long into the night by hearts that fluttered endlessly and stomachs that cramped painfully, held their tongues still, observing the demons out of the corner of their eyes or staring pointedly at nothing while they awaited the arrival of their conqueror. A few things, however, were so shocking that people couldn't hold themselves back from commenting.

"Sweet Lord of Light," gasped Madam Cordelia, the head seamstress who had sewn gowns for two generations of Hanrahan women and hoped to sew the wedding gown of Lord Bastian's eventual bride

before she finally retired. Her weathered trembled as she brought them to her lips, while her eyes grew moist, staring at the great hearth on the north side of the hall. "Those portraits... where did they get those?"

Above the massive stone hearth, two magnificent oil paintings commanded attention. The first depicted a powerful man in his prime, a scuffed and dented suit of armor that had seen its wearer through many famous battles. His strong jaw and penetrating gaze carried a sense of unflinching resolve, while his dark hair was shot through with premature silver at the temples. It was the glittering signet ring on his sword hand, however, that drew the most attention, and that made his identity unmistakably clear.

"That's Baron Brighton," whispered an elderly clerk who had served in the castle since his youth. "I'd know that face anywhere. He looks just like he did at the end of the War of Four Templars. That armor is still in the vaults, you know... collecting dust and tucked away with the rest of his trophies. But this painting... it looks like it's never seen the light of day. The colors are all fresh, like the day it was painted."

Next to the first painting, the second portrait depicted a woman of timeless grace and beauty, her crimson hair falling in elaborate braids over shoulders draped in emerald silk. Her milky skin seemed to glow in the painted candlelight, and her sapphire blue eyes held depths that seemed as mysterious as the lake outside the town walls. A delicate silver necklace hung just above the generous swell of her bosom, glittering with jewels so vibrantly colorful that they must have come from Airgead Mountain.

"Ah, Baroness Caitlin," Madam Cordelia breathed. "I missed ye so," she said as tears spilled freely from her eyes, rolling down her leathery cheeks. "I thought the Red Cough took ye, I never knew... never knew ye had a child ta tend to. If I'd known ye were still alive... I'd have... I'd have.." she said, only to break off in sobs as she pressed a handkerchief to her eyes.

The elderly servants of the keep who still recalled the fallen baron weren't the only ones who couldn't help but marvel at the paintings, though the comments from the wealthy and well-connected men at the front of the hall were colored with very different emotions.

"Look at the brushwork," murmured Master Aldwin, the silk merchant who fancied himself an art collector. "This isn't some country painter's work. This is... this is masterful. Like whoever painted these actually knew them, lived with them for years to be able to capture every detail so clearly. If the artist is still alive, I'd pay at least a hundred sovereigns to commission a portrait from them... no, two hundred for my wife to have one too."

"You can't buy work like this, Aldwin," the rough, rumbling voice of Hanrahan Town's only swordsmith said. "You buy the artist. Sponsor their whole life, give them a nice house in the country with a pretty view and a staff of servants, and then you hope they bring out this kind of genius for you when you want to borrow it."

"Don't be ridiculous, Master Tillman, when have you ever heard of anyone doing something so lavish just for a painting?" the silk merchant snorted. "But it is brilliant work..."

Young Roseen, who had been pressed into service helping Cossot, found herself studying the woman's painted features with an entirely different feeling that grew stronger and stronger the more she stared. After all, unlike most of the guests in the hall, she'd followed Cossot when her friend was summoned to receive instructions from the Crimson Knight, and she'd seen the face beneath the helm.

"The hair," she whispered to her friend. "Look at the hair color and the shape of her eyes. Even though the colors are different, doesn't she look a lot like..."

"She does," Cossot agreed, glancing over her shoulder at the doorway and wondering when the woman of the hour would finally join them. The hall was nearly full, she realized, so the wait couldn't be much longer now.

#### Chapter 968: In The Court Of The Crimson Knight (Part Two)

The guests had nearly all arrived, and a low hum of mutters, whispers, and occasional prayers for protection filled the great hall. But while the people gathered at Dame Sybyll's summons all knew their lives would change in some way or another tonight, there were a few people for whom that change was even more imminent, and likely far more drastic.

At the front of the hall, standing just beneath the dias that held the gilded throne and several other ornate chairs, three men stood, bound in heavy iron shackles and looking like they were about to die.

Bastian Hanrahan looked nervously around the hall, surreptitiously watching people file in while he kept his head bowed low and his hands clasped together. His posture resembled that of a well-trained dog who had been very loudly told 'Bad dog! No bones!' His shoulders were slumped, and even when he shifted, he never strayed from the spot on the floor where he'd been placed. And all the while, he kept glancing toward the doors as if he was waiting for his master to return and tell him that all had been forgiven.

His father, Ian, by contrast, scowled about the room with his lips pursed tightly together and his brows lowered so far that his dark eyes could barely be seen. He very pointedly faced away from his eldest son, turning his attention instead to the people who had once bowed and scraped before him, meeting the gazes of each and every one of them as if he could see into their hearts.

Some gave him a grim but reassuring nod, as if to say that they stood by him still and would speak up for him. Others turned away from him in shame, clearly intending to leap to the coattails of the next powerful patron to come along. The worst ones, however, were the ones that looked at him with an open, gloating sneer, as if they were pleased to watch him tumble from his lofty throne to face justice that was so rarely meted out against the members of the aristocracy.

But where the looks Ian Hanrahan received ran the gamut between strained pity and outright gloating, the looks directed to the final member of the trio in chains were universally uncomfortable, if they were willing to look at him at all.

While the Hanrahan father and son had taken advantage of their cousin's generous offer to wash themselves and dress in fresh clothing before they stood to face her accusations, Loman Lothian had done no such thing. He stood as straight and proud as an arrow in his torn and bloodstained robes. He refused any healing from the demon who had wounded him, choosing instead to pray to the Holy Lord of Light for a miracle of restoration.

What he'd received left him tired, worn, but free of obvious injuries as he stood in the great hall that just hours ago had hailed him as their savior. But as calm as he looked on the outside, inside, his heart trembled and shook, and the last words he'd heard from the diminutive witch echoed again and again through his ears.

"We can forgive you for what you did to Lord Jalal," Heila said as she bound his wrists. "We can forgive any number of our soldiers that you killed because this is war, and soldiers kill each other in war. But we can't forgive you for killing your own people," she said as she looked at the withered, crumpled bodies of the fallen acolytes before looking over the ramparts toward the west gate plaza.

"We can't forgive you for what you did tonight, and Dame Sybyll will judge you for your crimes," Heila told him. "If you survive tonight, I promise to bring you to an Inquisitor who can teach you a better way to find your faith, but compared to Diarmuid," she said with a sigh. "You may be more powerful, but your struggle will be much harder than his, assuming you live to begin it."



It wasn't hard for Loman to imagine a demon choosing to condemn him. They were mortal enemies and he'd slain many of them tonight. Condemnation was the least of what he should have expected. But to be condemned for the humans who had succumbed to the miracle he invoked rather than for the demons it slew... That was something he'd never expected, and her words cut deeper into his soul than he'd ever imagined the words of a demon could.

But as much as Loman wanted to sink into a night of rest, solitude, and prayer to sort out the countless questions that swirled in his mind like shards of glass slipping through his fingers, he wasn't going to be allowed that luxury.

The time had come, the benches were full of spectators, and even the walls of the hall were lined with people who had nowhere to sit. There would be no more delays, and no savior rushing to his rescue. Instead, a loud voice at the back of the hall boomed out from the muzzle of a claw demon who dressed in harlequin-patterned livery in midnight blue and emerald green, as though he were a servant of a wealthy noble and not a demon who had arrived in this hall amidst conquest and bloodshed.

"Stand and kneel!" the doorman called, pausing long enough for the people assembled in the hall to find their feet and kneel in the narrow aisles between rows of benches. A few moments of scraping furniture and awkward wobbling later, his voice echoed off the walls of the great hall again.

"Presenting, Dame Sybyll Hanrahan. Daughter of Baron Brighton Hanrahan. Progeny of the Harbinger of Death. Crimson Knight of Airgead Mountain. Ruler of Hanrahan by right of Birth and Blood," the doorman said, pausing after each impressive title to allow the audience to feel the weight of it before he continued on to the next.

All eyes turned to the entrance to the great hall, where the broken oak and wrought iron doors had been removed, leaving only the gaping doorway where everyone expected to see the famed Crimson Knight.

No one, however, was prepared for the crimson-haired woman with bone-white skin who stepped out of the corridor before pausing in the entryway.

The wounds that marred her perfectly sculpted features were nowhere to be seen as her crimson eyes swept over the crowd. Even though the few thimblefuls of blood Heila had been able to offer her were only enough for superficial healing, the Willow Witch understood well how important this moment was to Sybyll, and she was able to give the disfigured vampire a gift of healing that Nyrielle's previous

progeny were never able to imagine when they'd faced Templars and Inquisitors during the War of Undying Demons or the Brothers' War.

Now, Sybyll looked like a vision of strength and feminine perfection as she glided down the long aisle at the center of the great hall. Despite the winter chill, the sleeves of her rich, burgundy gown were made entirely of a light lace that revealed the toned musculature of her pale arms. Brightly polished garnets and flecks of obsidian glittered in the light of the great hall, covering the entirety of her bodice and trailing all the way down to her lush hips before turning into hundreds of twinkling points of glittering light scattered across her dark skirts like stars in the night sky.

She wore no necklace, nor any rings hanging from her ears, but a single, unmistakable signet ring on her right hand announced her identity to the people of the hall even more loudly than the doorman had.

Everyone had seen the reproduction of the lost Hanrahan signet ring, but few had seen the original, produced by the king's own jewelers in the Royal Capital. Now, the impeccable craftsmanship and the clearly visible maker's mark on the side of the ring added yet another layer of credibility to Dame Sybyll's claims, and many in the audience who still harbored doubts felt them slipping away.

Not a single person spoke as Sybyll ascended the dais to take her seat on the throne, looking out over the assembled people and slowly meeting each of their gazes before she moved on to the next person. Many of them were people she knew, even if they'd never known her as anything other than a visitor, a customer, a passerby, or a patron. But she knew them, and they knew her, and she could feel the wave of recognition rippling through the hall like a half-spoken greeting, welcoming her home.

"Ye may raise, but do no sit yet," she said with a smile as she greeted her people at last. "I've returned ta' me father's home, but I didn'a return alone. I needed help, an' I'll need help now ta' see justice done. So cheer fer me friends an' allies," she said as a genuine smile formed on her lips, revealing only the faintest hint of her fangs. "An' show them that a bit o' snow won't turn the hearts o' Hanrahan cold..."

#### Chapter 969: A Surprising Reception

No one in the great hall knew how they were supposed to respond to Dame Sybyll's command that they cheer for the friends and allies she had brought to sack their hometown.

Many in the crowd were slowly becoming convinced that she was who she claimed to be. She wore the true and genuine Hanrahan signet. She bore an uncanny resemblance to both the late Baron Brighton

Hanrahan and his wife, Baroness Caitlin. Most of all, among the people gathered in the hall, many of them remembered meeting her one winter or another.

It was just that, for some of those people, they had met her nearly twenty years ago, but the 'charming young lass' they remembered from back then hadn't aged a day.

But even if they could accept that she really was Baron Brighton's daughter, born to a mother who was believed by everyone to be barren, that didn't excuse turning to demons and assaulting their town. There were several soldiers in the hall now who had lost a friend or two during the battle, and they had dozens more friends recovering in the healer's tents in the bailey even now.

But when the doorman announced the first 'friend' or perhaps 'ally', those very soldiers were the first to raise their voices in shouts of thanks and welcome.

"Presenting! The Willow Witch, Lady Heila. Called the Willow Whip of the Arena. Lady-in-waiting to the Mother of Trees, and Healer of Hundreds tonight," the doorman called, standing to the side to allow the diminutive witch to pass.

Heila had changed out of her armored long coat, and she left behind the heavy War Hat as well, exchanging it for an elegant dress of rich brown silks that shimmered with warm coppery highlights and embroidery in patterns of falling leaves.

It was the final title that drew the strongest reaction from the crowd. While some drew back instinctively from a powerful witch, it was the soldiers in the crowd who knew they would have lost many more of their friends without Heila's witchcraft who erupted in genuine applause for the diminutive witch.

When Heila reached the raised dias, Sybyll did something that sent ripples of surprise through the most educated and well-connected members of the audience. She rose from the throne to personally greet this 'Lady Heila,' and even walked her to a seat next to her own.

The etiquette for meetings between members of the aristocracy was very clear, and the only time anyone could remember Baron Ian Hanrahan rising from his throne to welcome someone was when one of Marquis Bors Lothian's sons arrived. For Dame Sybyll to rise for this witch...

But before their minds could fully form a speculation about how important this witch might be among the demons, the doorman raised his voice and called out again.

"Presenting! Young Lord Hauke of the High Pass. Apprentice to the Mother of Trees. Master of Ice and Snow, who raised a shield of ice to protect the west gate plaza!"

This time the applause was even louder, and the people began to understand that Dame Sybyll didn't mean to force them to cheer for their conquerors; she wanted them to welcome the heroes who had prevented the battle from turning into a slaughter.

Few in the great hall had heard of the frost horned demons who were said to live deep in the mountains, but when they saw Hauke's tall figure striding into the great hall, wrapped in elegant robes of icy blue with his white mane flowing gently as he moved, it was hard to feel like they were witnessing something wicked. Instead, the word that came to mind for most of them was... majestic.

"Thank ye, fer carin' so much fer me people, even when they raised arms against ye'," Sybyll said as she rose from her throne again to guide Hauke to his seat before bowing to both Hauke and Heila.

In the crowd of people applauding, Sir Niall briefly squeezed Rufina's hand, whispering that he would only be a moment before he strode out of the crowd and knelt before the dais.

"Lady Heila, Lord Hauke," the young knight said in the loudest, clearest voice he could manage.

"Compared to you, I am young and cowardly," he said, speaking from the heart and without a trace of shame. "The 'soldiers' I brought with me aren't like your soldiers. They are farmers, woodsmen, and hunters most of the year. Tonight, they would have died under the rain of luminous arrows if not for you."

"You healed my wounded and guarded my villagers," he said, struggling to speak as his throat tightened and his eyes grew misty. "I thank you. Kyandan Village thanks you. And if you ever visit Kyandan Village, we will welcome you with open arms!"

His face burned with embarrassment as he knelt before the entire crowd, but deep within his heart, he felt like he couldn't live with himself if he didn't take this moment to thank these two for what they had done.

Nearly a third of his villagers had been injured in the rain of arrows, and it wasn't until the demons welcomed them under the dome of ice in the plaza that he felt like he would survive through the night. His heart shivered with dread at the idea of returning home to tell the wives or children of his 'soldiers' that he had brought them to Hanrahan Town only to lead them to their deaths. But thanks to these two demons, he wouldn't have to, and the thanks that filled his heart overflowed until it burst forth, and he had to speak up.

"This is the Eldritch way of things," Heila said, taking the moment the young knight had offered her to give these people their first lesson. "It is the duty of the strong to protect the weak. When a challenger takes up the mantle of a defeated Eldritch Lord, she assumes the responsibilities of caring for that lord's people."

"Dame Sybyll is one of your people," Heila said as she looked from the kneeling knight to the rest of the crowd. "But she is also one of ours. She worked hard from the beginning to preserve as many lives as she could because after the battle, she always intended to protect and care for you all. It isn't the Eldritch way for the common people to suffer when lords clash," she told the crowd.

"Ye don'a have ta' lift me up b'fore them, Lady Heila," Sybyll said with a dazzling smile. "But I thank ye' fer it. Sir Niall," she said, turning to address the young knight. "Yer heart is pure an' strong, an' it lies in tha' right place. Stay true ta' that an' ye'll have a place in me court in tha' future."

"Thank, thank you, Dame Sybyll," he said, bowing his head deeply and flushing bright red as he heard the dulcet tones of her voice singing his praises. Even when he returned to Rufina's side, his head felt light enough that his feet barely touched the ground.

"Hold 'im close, lass," Sybyll teased the young woman who clutched Sir Niall's hand as soon as he returned to her side. "Good men are rarer 'an gold, an' twice as precious," she added with a wink. "So hold on tight an' I'm sure he'll treat ye right," she said before signalling to the doorman to resume the introductions.

## Chapter 970: Tests Within The Trial

Sybyll had started with Hauke and Heila deliberately to break the tension in the hall and to introduce the 'demons' who the people of Hanrahan could accept most readily, even though Hauke was one of the most junior among the people who would join her on the dais. But propriety and etiquette came in far behind practicality, and Sybyll cared far more about the impact this moment could have on shaping people's hearts and minds than she did about any 'rules' a lord was supposed to follow.

"Presenting! Inquisitor Diarmuid of the Holy City, Bearer of the Flames of Justice and Seeker of Truth," the doorman shouted.

The title announced for the Inquisitor might have been simpler than the ones given to Heila and Hauke, but the impact of the announcement was even greater when the dark-haired man in crimson and gold robes entered the hall.

Diarmuid's back was straight and his stride was strong and confident as he approached the dais, even though he felt neither strong nor confident as a participant in this process. As he walked, he could feel the weight of hundreds of eyes tracking every step he took and every flutter of his ceremonial robes. But the weight he felt from the common folk paled in comparison to the feeling of a mountain falling on his shoulders when he saw Loman Lothian for the first time since the battle began.

Dame Sybyll had stood to greet him, welcoming him onto the dais and gesturing to a seat next to the horned witch. She acted like she was receiving an old friend and even the witch herself stood to welcome him, smiling warmly as if he belonged with people like her and the frost horn demon already on the dais.

Meanwhile, Disciple Loman stood in chains, his head bowed as if in prayer while his black and silver robes hung in bloody tatters on his body. Hours ago, they had stood as close as brothers preparing for battle, but now, they stood so far apart.

Seeing Loman in chains, there was a part of Diarmuid that wanted to abandon his place on the dais and rush to his fellow clergyman's side, if for no reason other than to stand in solidarity with the battered Disciple. But Dame Sybyll's words before the procession began kept him firmly in his place.

"Ye'r a good man, Diarmuid," the crimson haired woman said when he reached the sitting room where Sybyll had gathered her 'close friends and allies' before the start of the event. "Ye do what's right an' true, even when others wouldn't, and ye' protect the innocent from harm. I'd have ye' do tha same t'night. Sit in judgment wit' me. Hear me testimony an' Ian's too. Examine tha' evidence. Be tha' upright man ye' are an' speak out against me if I stray too far from justice ta' vengeance."

"Why?" Diarmuid asked, struggling to comprehend how a creature of the night could put so much faith in his character, or why she would bother asking him to serve as a member of her court for what would clearly be little more than a show trial. "You keep saying I'm a good man, but you don't know me. I've only come to Lothian March this year, so how is it you have any opinion of me?"

"I have a junior brother in arms," Sybyll said simply. "We were trained by tha' same knight. He was caught up in trouble that was none o' his makin', an' a lord wanted ta' sweep up his parents in his guilt for tha' 'crimes' he were a part of. Ye were tha' one to declare them innocent, an' innocent they were. Ye stood against our enemies because it were tha' right thing ta' do. Ye helped me junior wit' out even knowing him an saved his only kin."

"Yer a good man, Diarmuid," Sybyll repeated. "An' it takes a good man ta' stand up fer what's right, even against tha' strong. So do what's right t'night. An don't worry that I'll knock ye down fer it," she added with a smile that was surprisingly charming. "If I tried ta' hurt ye, Lady Heila would turn against me fer sure," she said with a light, musical laugh.

Now, that very same Lady Heila welcomed him onto the dais and smiled at him as he took his seat.

"You're among friends here, Inquisitor," Heila said quietly as the doorman announced the next person to join them. "Even if you didn't save Ollie's parents from Owain, you saved your people instead of unleashing your flames. Some people might not agree with your decision," she said with a pointed look at Loman's ragged figure. "But even if you can't see it tonight, one day, you'll know that you did the right thing."

"Is it the same for him?" Diarmuid asked, pointing to the dashing young lord walking down the aisle to the applause of the audience. "Did Lord Liam make the 'right decision' to sit up here tonight?"

"He's a prisoner," Heila admitted, unwilling to conceal the truth from a man she hoped would join Ignatious and relieve some of the loneliness and isolation that tormented her beloved. "My Lady has extended an offer to Liam Dunn, but he has yet to accept it. He was sent here to learn the truth of what his family faces if they stand against my Lady in this war in the hopes that it would prevent tragedies," she said, though she couldn't keep a trace of bitterness from entering her voice.

"You don't agree with this?" Diarmuid probed, surprised at the witch's statement after she had spoken so eloquently about protecting the common people and keeping them safe from the clash of lords. "Is it because he's a lord that you have a problem with him?"

"It's because he burned villages to the ground and killed villagers and their children who weren't even soldiers," Heila said, glaring at the young lord as he took his seat on the opposite side of the dais.

"My Lady is right," admitted reluctantly, letting out a deep sigh. "Making peace will save more lives but... he better work hard as a lord to make amends for what he did. If he doesn't," she said as one hand caressed the whip at her hip. "I'll have to go teach him another lesson."

"I... see," Diarmuid said awkwardly as he realized why Loman looked as if he'd been strapped to a pole and flogged. Glancing to his other side, he watched Dame Sybyll, smiling and putting on a show of welcoming a 'prisoner' onto the dais as though he were just another friend, and he was struck by a sudden revelation.

The demons weren't just coming to conquer. They really were coming to make peace. They might not all agree with the terms of that peace, and the Holy Lord of Light above knew just how much the demons had suffered at the hands of the people they were trying to make peace with... but the demons were trying.

But the part that shook the Inquisitor to the core wasn't just the fact that the demons were trying to make peace... It was the realization that they didn't have to, but they were trying anyway. The strength they had already displayed was enough to conquer virtually any barony in Lothian March, and the most powerful demons and witches hadn't even appeared on the battlefield here.

This wasn't a plea for peace and an offer of surrender because the demons faced extinction if they couldn't offer up terms the Kingdom of Gaal could accept. It was exactly the opposite, an offer to humanity to save themselves from utter destruction.

"Lady Heila," Diarmuid asked hesitantly after swallowing the lump in his throat. "If I speak out against Dame Sybyll tonight, will she really heed my words? Am I here to be a convenient prop or is the position on this court that she's given me genuine?"

"You have as much of a voice here as I do, Inquisitor," Heila said quietly as the next person entered the hall. "And she's giving the same weight to Lord Liam and Lord Hugo. It's a test for all of you," she whispered. "She's watching to see if Liam will abandon his principles in order to curry favor, or if Hugo will hold back secrets to save his father."

"And me?" Diarmuid asked with a raised brow. "I suppose she's testing to see if I'm willing to choose truth and justice over my faith in order to rule in her favor?"



"Almost," Heila said with a knowing look, though she refused to say more than that. Because in reality, it wasn't Dame Sybyll who was testing Diarmuid, it was Heila. And the test wasn't to see if he could abandon his faith to act as a simple magistrate... The test was to see if he could keep to his faith once he discovered the lies buried within it.