

The Vampire 981

Chapter 981: Ian Hanrahan's Secrets (Part One)

Diarmuid's questions pierced through the smokescreen of Ian Hanrahan's blustering like a beam of pure white light, shining down on the ugliness beneath and revealing it for everyone to see.

While the common man might not be aware of the laws and customs that surrounded handling an incident like the one that occurred with Dame Sybyll and her mother, once Diarmuid pointed it out, it became plainly obvious that the Baron had exceeded his authority.

"Inquisitor," Ian Hanrahan pleaded. "You have to understand the damage that wild accusations like theirs could have done..."

"Oh, I do," Diarmuid said calmly. "But by every version of the story told so far, hers and yours, the woman claiming to be Baroness Caitlin approached you privately in your own chambers instead of confronting you in public during the feast. That suggests she had not only an awareness of the severity of the issue but also a desire to handle the matter privately, where the 'damage' could have been minimized."

"That alone suggests that the woman was Baroness Caitlin," the inquisitor continued. "A scheming con artist would have confronted you in public, forcing you to render judgments in front of a crowd of your people. The fact that she reached your chambers unobserved by others also suggests that she is aware of at least a few of your keep's secrets in order to move about unseen during a day when so many people were your guests."

"There are dozens of ways to explain that. She could have seduced one of the..." the captive baron started to say, puffing his chest up with excuses ready on his tongue, but the inquisitor spoke ruthlessly over him, denying him any further opportunity to muddy the waters.

"Silence!" Diarmuid shouted, hurling a small ball of flame toward the puffed-up baron that exploded in a shower of sparks near the man's feet and sent him scurrying backward several paces. "I told you that I was only interested in hearing the truth from you, yet still, you try to fill the air with your obfuscations," the Inquisitor bellowed.

"Even if you didn't bring them to the Lothian Court," Diarmuid said sharply, placing a hand on his chest for emphasis as he spoke. "You could have called for a member of my order to question them. We could

have helped you to sort out the truth from lies, and if there had been a demonic scheme from the beginning, we would have found it!"

At this point, it was hard for Diarmuid to ignore the fact that tonight's tragedy and bloodshed seemed to flow almost entirely from Ian Hanrahan's decisions so many years ago. Dame Sybyll brought a demon army in order to claim the justice that had been denied to her for her mother's death. But if Ian Hanrahan had simply turned the mother and daughter over to the Lothian Court or the Church back then, how many of tonight's tragedies would have been averted?

"Dame Sybyll," Diarmuid said, turning to face the woman sitting casually on the gilded throne. She looked calm and relaxed, but from where Diarmuid stood, he could see that her sharpened fingernails had dug deep gouges into the armrests of the heavy throne and the gilding had flaked off in several places to reveal the wood beneath it.

Clearly, listening to her cousin slandering both her and her mother hadn't been easy for the powerful Crimson Knight to endure, but she'd done it, honoring her word and allowing Diarmuid to take charge of the questioning. In the back of his mind, he raised his estimation of the powerful vampire, and the faint feelings of sympathy he felt for what she had endured in her life of hardship were joined by a dim, grudging kernel of respect.

"It's clear that Baron Hanrahan will not speak a word of truth tonight," he said, issuing his first judgment on the matter. "While there may be some reason and logic to his statements, and a thin veneer of truth clings to a few of his words, what little truth is there to be found has been blended thoroughly with fabrications, deflections, and speculations."

"By your leave," he said, clasping his hands respectfully and bowing his head, even though his words were still as sharp as knives. "I would have him gagged in addition to his bindings so that he cannot further poison the minds and hearts of the people of Hanrahan tonight with his deceit."

"Granted," Sybyll said, smiling for the first time since her murderous cousin had started to speak. "Captain Ultrech," she began, only for the smile to falter as she realized her mistake. "Under-captain Saltaen," she corrected herself, addressing one of the boarish men who still wore his heavy armor from the battle in the plaza. "Muzzle me' cousin, an' if he struggles, be as rough wit' him as ye need ta."

"Thank you, Dame Sybyll," Diarmuid said, ignoring the frightened baron as the demon soldier roughly dragged him to his feet before shoving one of the baron's own handkerchiefs in his mouth and using

another to bind it in place. "Now, if you don't mind, I want to ask a question of Ian Hanrahan's sons," the Inquisitor continued.

"I told ye," Sybyll said from her position on the gilded throne. "He doomed himself wit' his own deeds. Ask what ye' need to bring his secrets out in ta' tha' open."

"Lord Bastian, Lord Hugo," Diarmuid said, turning his attention to the young lord in chains and the one sitting near Dame Sybyll. "Has your father ever mentioned Dame Sybyll to you, or the details of his encounter? Has he ever revealed any knowledge about Baron Brighton Hanrahan's death and his father Aiden Hanrahan's role in it?"

At this point, everyone in the hall seemed to be on the edge of their seats, though the crowd was split between people who were leaning forward, eager to see justice done, and the people who were leaning back, as if they were afraid that they'd be caught in the Inquisition's flames once their dealings with the bound and gagged baron came to light.

One thing was clear to everyone in the hall. The Inquisition's centuries-old reputation for the relentless pursuit of truth and its punishment of evil wasn't exaggerated in the slightest. If anything, the famed inquisitors with their Holy Flames were even more terrifying than they'd been led to believe.

And this one, this Diarmuid who had come all the way from the Holy City, wouldn't hold back in the slightest in his quest to discover the truth... Even if it meant offending one of the most powerful men in Lothian March to do it!

Chapter 982: Ian Hanrahan's Secrets (Part Two)

"My father kept many secrets," Hugo said, shaking his head and glowering at the bound and gagged man who was responsible for guiding the course of his life for so many years, until he dumped his bastard son on Owain Lothian in an attempt to wash his hands of the young man. "I was one of his secrets for most of my life."

Even Hugo hadn't known who his father was for most of his life. His mother only told him that he was an 'important man' in the distant frontier. That he was wealthy and powerful, and that he would provide for them.

But his mother understood that children were horrible keepers of secrets, and so in order to keep Ian Hanrahan's secret safe, she'd kept the identity of Hugo's father a secret, even from him. It was only years later that Hugo discovered that the controlling baron had threatened to cut off the six silver pennies he sent her every month if word of Hugo's parentage ever circulated.

Later, once Hugo learned the truth, the same threat applied to him. His father was willing to pay for his schooling and subsidize his expenses as a young scholar, but only so long as Hugo never set foot in Lothian March or spread word about his true status as a nobleman's son.

"That's why he sent me to live in Keating Duchy and had me sent to a school there," Hugo explained with eyes that glittered with memories of a simpler, happier time before he'd been dragged into his father's schemes.

"He wanted me far enough away that no one in Lothian March would easily discover my existence," he said with a trace of bitterness creeping into his voice. "But he wanted me close enough that he could call me home if there was ever an emergency that required his 'spare heir.' I never even met my father until Bastian fell from his horse a few years ago and Father finally summoned me home. Until then, I didn't even know who my own father was."

Beneath the dais, Cossot and Roseen looked up at the young lord with a renewed sense of pity. They were both much younger when the hawk-nosed scholar showed up in the barony, stepping out of a carriage from far away to much fanfare and praise as Baron Hanrahan 'welcomed his son home.' At the time, countless children had played make-believe, imagining how wonderful it would be to discover that they were the hidden heir to a powerful lord.

Only later would they begin to see the cracks in the childish fantasy, particularly when Bastian recovered and Hugo's presence in Hanrahan became an awkward reminder of their liege lord's indiscretions. But they'd never imagined that the young lord had suffered for much of his youth without even knowing his own father's name...

"I know that you were estranged from him for many years," Diarmuid said in a carefully neutral tone to the young lord who had chosen to side with the demons over his own people. Hugo might be a tragic figure, but in the Inquisitor's mind, that didn't excuse turning his back on his countrymen and giving his loyalty to the demons.

Many men struggled with such burdens without turning to creatures of darkness to vent their grievances, and no matter how Hugo had suffered, it wasn't an excuse for heresy and treason. But Hugo

wasn't the one on trial at the moment, and Diarmuid pressed on with his questions even as he wrestled with his discomfort at the young lord's decisions.

"But for a short time, Ian Hanrahan was preparing you as his heir," the Inquisitor said. "Wasn't there anything he said to you? Any warnings about the Crimson Knight that would indicate he knew about the consequences of his actions? Or was there anything else he might have revealed to you that would help in rendering a judgment here?"

Diarmuid was casting a wide net, but at the moment, he still struggled to name the crime that Ian Hanrahan was guilty of. If he knowingly killed Baroness Caitlin, then he was guilty of magnicide and of concealing his crime. If he believed the old woman to be an imposter and killed her without investigating her claim, then he was guilty of a lesser crime and abuse of his authority to wield high justice on behalf of the Lothian Marquis and the King of Gaal.

Which crimes he was guilty of hinged on what Ian Hanrahan knew at the time he'd executed Dame Sybyll's mother, and even though Diarmuid suspected the man of lying to preserve his own life, he couldn't say for certain that Ian Hanrahan believed himself to be responsible for his own aunt's death.

The penalties for the lesser crimes were still severe, but they fell far short of a death sentence. And unless Diarmuid heard evidence of something so dire that it warranted death, he would be obligated to oppose Dame Sybyll if she insisted on executing her cousin. If that was the result of his investigation, then that was what he would do... but Diarmuid couldn't help but hope that he would find something that would justify letting the vampire on the throne have her way without tearing away the wafer-thin layer of civility that had formed between demons and humans in the Hanrahan great hall.

"I know that my father is a cheat and a swindler," Hugo said with a heavy sigh, wishing he could give the Inquisitor what he wanted. "I know that he keeps two sets of ledgers because he asked for my help in creating the forgery for the Lothian's steward to inspect," he said. "I know that he has raised the tithe collected from his merchants and farmers by two parts in twenty over the past five years, but he has reduced the amount he sends to the Lothians by three parts in twenty over the same period," he explained.

Hugo's voice hadn't been very loud; perhaps only the front half of the hall could clearly hear what he said, but even that was enough to send shockwaves rippling through the wealthy and influential people who had made their way to the front rows of seats at the beginning of the late-night gathering as if they belonged there.

"Unbelievable," Cossot's father, Gaius, the famed whitesmith, muttered darkly. "So, where has all the gold we've been sending him actually gone? If the Lothians aren't demanding it in order to fight the demons off in the south and the north, then where has the money been going? He can't have been spending it on his own army, or they wouldn't have put up such a pathetic fight tonight!"

"What do ye know 'bout raisin' and equippin' armies, Gaius," the blacksmith sitting nearby countered. "Do ye know how much it costs ta' get good steel from tha' foundries in Keating fer forgin' fine weapons an' stout armor? Or even just tha' mendin' of it all?"

"No," the richly dressed whitesmith admitted. "But I know how much gold he's taken from me, and from every jeweler or master carver in town for the past five years, and it adds up to enough gold to build a whole village! He even had Head Priest Germot up in front of us last year, saying that we must dig deeply to support the people keeping us safe from the demons and providing for the people in the march who lost their livelihoods to demon raids," he spat. "I bet that priest was taking a cut of the extra for his own coffers..."

"Well, maybe ye'll get lucky," the blacksmith said quietly, nodding his head in the direction of the two young women standing at the base of the dais, patiently awaiting the whims of the woman sitting on the gilded throne. "Yer daughter seems ta' have caught Dame Sybyll's favor. Maybe she can get yer money back," he said with a toothy grin, before his smile faded as he thought about how close he'd come to closing up his business a few years ago when the tithes went up so sharply.

"But, if yer daughter can get yer money back," the blacksmith added in a more serious tone. "Tell her ta' get mine back too!"

Around the hall, the pair of smiths weren't the only ones wondering where their money had gone if it hadn't been spent on increased Lothian taxes. An increase of two parts in twenty hadn't been enough to force many of them out of business, but it had ruined many of their plans to do more.

For some, it meant putting off repairs in their shops or making do with older, worn-out tools. For others, it meant disappointing their wives and children when there wasn't enough money left for the little luxuries that made all their hard work worthwhile.

But it was the people outside the great hall who had suffered the worst when once profitable businesses tightened their belts and let go of staff who had worked for one family or another for nearly half their lives. It was those people who were driven out into the cold who filled up the increasingly run-down neighborhoods of Hanrahan town closest to the town walls.

And while there were some men in the great hall tonight who didn't care much for the troubles of the people who had once labored for them, many others saw their staff as extensions of their own families. They watched as people they'd invited over on feast days and shared festivals with grew thinner, and more wretched as the years wore on, until they could barely recognize the people they'd turned into...

Just like people had been unable to recognize Baroness Caitlin, they realized. And that hardship, every bit of it, had flowed from Ian Hanrahan and his father, Aiden!

Chapter 983: Ian Hanrahan's Secrets (Part Three)

"Father always claimed that life on the edge of the Frontier was hard," Hugo continued as his voice grew louder so the entire hall could hear over the voices that began muttering and protesting when he revealed how his father had been exploiting the people of his barony. "It was his favorite excuse for demanding more and giving less. Life is hard, so we have to tighten our belts," he said in a mocking imitation of his father's voice. "Life is hard, so we have to fill up our stores for when the lean years come."

"The truth is that he hated Baron Brighton," Hugo said, slamming his fist into the armrest of his chair for emphasis. "He always said that our treasuries were depleted by years of his uncle's overspending, and if there was a failure he could blame on my granduncle, he never hesitated to lay it at his feet. But I've read the ledgers and the family histories," the scholarly young lord continued as he stood to face Dame Sybyll.

"Your father once wrote in a decree that the keep should dine only on the best fish, the finest beef, and the most succulent lamb," Hugo explained, though his voice contained nothing but admiration for this decree. "He challenged the fishers and the farmers to offer their best harvests to the keep where he would pay twice the going price for the very best specimens offered each day."

Many of the older merchants in the crowd nodded silently along with Hugo as he explained the way the old Baron had managed his domain. They had called it the 'Baron's Bounty', and it applied to more than just fish and meat. Gaius's father had sold all of his best ornaments to the Hanrahan family, and it was that wealth that allowed him to commission molds all the way from the Royal Capital, which were responsible for some of Gaius's best-selling works to this day.

In fact, Baron Brighton refused to spend lavishly on goods imported from the kingdom's interior. He always said that the best things were the things made by hearts and hands he knew, and he would never short his own people just to enjoy the extraordinary creations of some distant stranger.

"It's written in the ledgers that harvests grew year over year, and that people competed fiercely to put food on your father's table," the young scholar continued from the dais. "But my grandfather put an end to paying double, and my father changed the rule entirely. Now, my father sends armed men into the markets to find the best fish, the finest beef, and the most succulent lamb, and he demands that they be offered to the baron's table at a steep discount."

"Inquisitor," Hugo said as he addressed the man in crimson and gold robes. "My father never liked me and he never trusted me, but he used me when it was convenient to do so," he said. "I can tell you that he despised the policies of Dame Sybyll's father, and he always felt jealous of the love that some people in the barony still hold for Baron Brighton and the way they speak of the 'good years' under his rule."

"But even I can't explain all of the cryptic names and entries in his ledgers," Hugo admitted. "He was a man of many secrets. He took sacks of silver and sometimes even gold to meet with people whom he would not name, who did work for him that he would never speak of. Sometimes, common folk who had offended him went missing, but if there was anything to link my father to what happened, I never saw evidence of it."

"I'm sorry," Hugo said as he looked at his half-brother, sitting on the ground in chains and looking more frightened and pathetic than Ian had ever seen him. "If it's my father's secrets that you're after, you'll have better luck with my brother. Maybe Bastian knows more than I do..."

"You may not have all of the answers, Lord Hugo," Diarmuid said as he processed what the young lord had shared. "But what you have told us says a great deal about your father's motives. If his resentment of Baron Brighton is as deep as you say, then he had even more reason to fear the return of Baroness Caitlin and her daughter."

It wasn't hard for most people to make the leap to the conclusion that Diarmuid had just drawn. Baron Ian Hanrahan had said that the 'damage' the portly baron was afraid she could cause would come in the form of people rallying around the tragic, fallen noblewoman, and the pressure they would exert on him for a return to the 'way things used to be.'

Moreover, the Baroness was certain to be familiar with how her husband had managed the barony. She could easily reveal the true costs of running things and expose the lies Baron Ian used to manipulate his people into tithing more than their fair share. To a man who intended to cheat and swindle, the baroness represented a clear threat to his ambitions.

"Lord Bastian," Diarmuid said as he turned to the young man who had put as much distance between himself and his increasingly disgraced father as possible. "Is there anything more you can share with us about the secrets your father kept that could explain his actions so long ago?"

All eyes gathered on Ian Hanrahan's legitimate son, waiting for the greater secrets he might be privy to. Already, the news that Ian Hanrahan had been squeezing even greater tithes out of his people than what the Lothians leveled against them, and that he'd shorted the Lothians on what the barony owed was enough to wear away the feelings of patriarchal fellowship that Ian had stoked in the men in the crowd when he spoke of scheming women who would try to trap them and rob them of their wealth with a child of dubious parentage.

Now that Bastian was about to speak, everyone waited with baited breath for what he was about to say.

Chapter 984: Ian Hanrahan's Secrets (Part Four)

"I finally understand, little brother," Bastian said with a chuckle that contained a great deal of self loathing and the faintest hint of madness as well. "It wasn't until I heard him just now that I knew, but seeing our cousin up there on the throne, I should have known a long time ago that there was more to it than just his bitterness over mother going back to Carew March to live with her parents."

Bastian's words set off a ripple of murmurs in the crowd as dozens of tongues recalled the rumors that had spread years ago when Baroness Thadela returned to her home in Berenger Barony to the north, ostensibly to care for her ailing mother. Years had passed since then, however, and there had never been any word of her returning home.

There had been speculation that Ian Hanrahan had done something to greatly upset his wife, and when Hugo Hanrahan turned up a few years later, the people of Hanrahan had quietly speculated that she'd discovered her husband's infidelity and refused to be near him again, but those had only been rumors.

"Little brother," Bastian said as his laughter grew into a great belly shaking chuckle that made it difficult to speak. "Did you ever see the 'loans' that father took out for 'fine silks', 'fine wine' and 'rich smoking leaf'? Did you notice how, no matter how much money is in the treasury, he never pays them off? He just sends out his three silver pennies to merchants in Keating or Carew, every month, without fail..."

A person couldn't do much with three silver pennies. In the towns of Keating or Carew, a person could pay for a small cottage with two pennies a month, and they could feed a family of two or three on the remaining penny if they were careful with their money.

To wealthy merchants who traded in luxury goods, it was even less notable. Such men could easily spend three or even five silver pennies on a single night of entertainment for their family with a sumptuous feast, lively music and jugglers or acrobats. It was such a pittance that even if Baron Hanrahan had stopped paying the loan entirely, the rich merchants who were collecting on the debt might not even notice until several months went by.

"I noticed," Hugo said with a frown. "Father always said that they were loans made by merchants who were old friends of the family," he said as he scratched his chin while he tried to recall the details. "The loan sheets stated clearly that there was no interest to be levied on the original loan, only that there would be a repayment of three pennies, silver, every month, until the balance was paid."

"Father said that they were expensive gifts that he needed to present to other lords in the Lothian Court," Hugo said as he folded his hand over his chest, scowling at his father. "And when I suggested he just pay them off since there was plenty of gold in the treasury, he said that the relationship was worth more than repaying the loan. Since there was no interest to be collected even if it stretched out over decades, and Father clearly didn't want to argue about it, I never bothered with it again."

"You see? It's right there, in plain sight," Bastian laughed. All the years that his father had said that there wasn't enough money to send his son and heir to study in Lothian or better yet, in Keating the way Liam Dunn had, yet there had been 'plenty of money' in the treasury.

In fact, Bastian had made due with far less than most heirs received. While he never lacked for fine clothing because his father insisted on keeping up appearances, he'd never benefited from the kind of education most noblemen of his station received. Instead of sending his son away to distant academies, he hired tutors who were willing to live in Hanrahan in exchange for modest stipends.

Those tutors, however, turned out to be the sort of men who were so incapable that they had no prospects anywhere else. Bastian's riding instructor had been a drunkard whose glory days ended when he was injured during the War of Inches, and the man who tutored him on the laws of the kingdom seemed to be a fellow whose extensive knowledge of the law came from years of arguing before magistrates to keep himself out of prison.

Yet for some things, Ian Hanrahan never ran out of money and never complained about spending it...

"I'm willing to bet, little brother, that if anything ever happened to Father, you'd have kept sending the payments on those loans and been none the wiser. But Father warned me once," the young lord continued as he turned to face his father, pointing accusingly at the portly baron with hands that were still bound in chains.

"You made sure I knew," Bastian said as he puffed his chest out in a crude imitation of his father's mannerisms. "'If ever a young woman turns up with her mother, claiming to be your sister, then you remind her that we've already paid what I promised and you send her on her way, or you make sure she never speaks of it again. One way or another, don't ever let them claim you owe them any kind of status or place in our home!'" he quoted as faithfully as he could.

"The loans are a joke," Bastian said as he turned back to face his half brother. "'Fine silk' is how he refers to the skin of a dairy maid named Polly. He said he couldn't keep his hands off her because her skin was so silky soft. 'Fine Wine' is how he referred to a widow named Madge who had 'aged a touch past her prime' but was still plenty ripe. And rich smoking leaf..."

"I think we all understand," Hugo interrupted before his idiot of a half brother could make things any more scandalous with details that the people didn't need to hear. While Bastian was exposing his father's secrets, he was also destroying the reputations of these women by naming them publicly and yet his elder brother didn't seem to be aware of the harm he was doing to these women just by speaking their names.

In the crowd, some people were already leaning over to their neighbors, whispering about what little they knew.

"You remember Polly, don't you?" one woman asked a close friend. "She was the one who turned out the crumbly cheese pressed with herbs."

"I miss her cheese," the woman next to her said. "But one night, she came back from the baron's feast looking all flustered, and a month later, she had packed up and left. That boy she fancied spent months searching for her before he gave up and spent what he'd been saving on a cottage near the wilderness. Whatever happened to him anyway?"

"You're saying that your father kept mistresses and paid them for their silence?" Diarmuid asked, holding a hand up high to quiet the crowd and making sure that the accusation was clear for everyone to understand.

"Not just mistresses," Bastian said as his laughter finally stopped and his expression grew serious. "If Father took a tumble with a serving girl, he might give her a penny or two to keep her quiet, but to send money every month... He only did that to care for his children."

"Little brother," Bastian said as he looked up at Hugo's figure on the dais. "Father warned me about strange women showing up with daughters in tow, just like grand aunt Caitlin showed up with cousin Sybyll, because he knew that there were women out there with his daughters."

"Three of them, Hugo," Bastian said as he looked directly into his brother's wide eyes. "You and I, we have three half-sisters who we've never even met because Father keeps them secret..."

Chapter 985: Sybyll's Judgment

Bastian Hanrahan's revelation that his father had hidden away a trio of illegitimate daughters spread through the crowd like wildfire. Hugo's appearance years ago had been shocking enough. If Hugo had been older than Bastian, if he'd been born before Ian Hanrahan's marriage, then there would have been more understanding about the 'youthful indiscretions' of a young lord.

But Hugo was younger than Bastian by more than four years, which transformed a simple 'indiscretion' into a matter of infidelity. Once was scandalous, but the way Bastian spoke of it, his father had been bedding countless women over the years, paying them to keep quiet, and rushing them away whenever he accidentally sired another illegitimate child.

"What about Maude, the lacemaker?" a voice in the crowd cried. "Did Baron Hanrahan really give her coin to flee a man who was rough with her, or was she one of his women?"

"Two years ago, my Lilwen came home from the keep in tears after delivering our tithe, but she never told me why she was upset," another man said. "But our tithe was reduced by two silver pennies that year and the year after too... Are you saying that the Lord Baron has been having his way with my wife!?! And all this time, I've been praising her for helping us save up for a cottage outside the walls," the man choked out when he realized where the extra money had been coming from.

"Vera, what about my neighbor Vera who..."

"My sister Elsbina...."

"I haven't seen Florrie since...."

"SILENCE!"

Dame Sybyll's voice resounded off the walls of the great hall like thunder, reminding everyone who had become caught up in Inquisitor Diarmuid's slow, methodical interrogation and unfolding drama of his son's revelation that the woman who sat on the gilded throne wasn't just Baron Brighton's long-lost daughter but the powerful Crimson Knight as well.

Instantly, tongues stilled and all eyes turned to face the crimson-haired woman on the throne. Some still wanted to cry out, to beg for her to give them justice for the women in their lives who were missing or who had been wronged by the disgraced baron.

But one look at the smoldering fury in her eyes was enough to make even the most aggrieved among them swallow their own tongues and keep silent until she gave them permission to speak.

"Cousin Bastian," Sybyll said as she looked down at Ian's shackled heir with eyes that smoldered with barely restrained fury. "Can ye write out a list of everyone ye know who yer father has harmed? Every crime, large an' small, every abuse ye've been privy to or heard of in yer years at his side?"

Bastian's mouth hung open like a fish gasping for air when he heard his cousin's 'request.' Everything. She wanted him to write out everything he'd seen and heard in all his years as Ian Hanrahan's heir.

It wasn't that he couldn't do it. He might not be as clever as his half-brother, Hugo, but he could still remember a good many names and faces. Men his father had met with when he needed a 'problem' to be solved, women he'd taken back to his chambers after a feast... even a few women that his father had sent to his son's bed chambers.

But that was the rub of it, and the part that made Bastian hesitate to agree to Sybyll's demand. If he wrote out all of Ian Hanrahan's crimes, he'd expose his knowledge of them... along with his involvement in them. He'd acted as his father's messenger more than once, both collecting extra 'tithes' or delivering 'gifts' to other members of the Lothian Court in exchange for their support.

Bastian Hanrahan might never have schemed against anyone, but he'd been a tool in his father's hands, helping the aging baron to bend others to his will and enjoying the fruits of his father's ill-gotten gains. If he wrote out his father's crimes, all of that would come to light.

And yet... it was also the only chance that Bastian would ever have to strike back against the old man who had neglected him so badly in the years that mattered most. For all the petty slights, all the times he'd been told that he was a failure as a man for not marrying a good woman and producing a grandson who could inherit the throne before Ian died... for all the times his father had lined his own pockets while telling his son that there wasn't enough to go around...

Bastian could finally strike back at the old man, this one time, at the very end. He could finally drop a stone on his father that was so heavy, it would drag him down to his death, and in doing so, he could preserve his own life. That alone was reason enough to do as his cousin asked. So long as she would forgive him for his complicity in his father's crimes, then it was worth exposing himself to ensure that his father died for what he had done.

"I, I can," the young lord choked out around the lump that suddenly formed in his throat.

"An' yer half-sisters," Sybyll continued. "They're me cousins too. Do ye know where they are, an' can ye reach them when tha' time comes?"

"When the," Bastian started to say, only to change his mind as he felt the weight of the crimson-eyed vampire's gaze. "Yes, I, I know where they are and their names. I've never met them, but it should be enough to find them."

"Cousin Hugo," Sybyll said, softening her tone slightly as she turned to the young lord on the dais. "Can ye do tha' same? Can ye write out the wrongs ye know yer father has done? From tha' ledgers ye've seen an' anythin' else ye know?"

"I've already begun," Hugo said with a nod. "I'll need to examine the ledgers since I left in the spring to serve Owain Lothian," he added. "But you'll have a full accounting of the wrongs I can discover within three days' time."

Hugo had known that it would come to this from the moment they left the Vale of Mists. Whether it came up in a trial or if it was simply something that his cousin Sybyll or Lady Ashlynn needed when they took control of Hanrahan Barony, the things he knew about his father's wealth and where it had come from had to be useful to someone.

Lady Ashlynn had given him choices when he asked to enter her service, and everyone in the Vale of Mists had made it clear that he would have to prove with his deeds that he could be trusted before anyone would consider giving him a place in the new world that Lady Ashlynn and Lady Nyrielle were building.

He understood that and he accepted it, so when he realized how useful his knowledge could be, he made every effort to provide it to the people who could use it. It might be a small thing, after all, the Vale of Mists seemed to have skilled spies of their own, but at the very least, it proved his intentions and that was enough for now.

"Do ye see it now, Inquisitor Diarmuid?" Sybyll asked with a predatory gleam in her eyes. "Do ye see why I claimed me cousin's life long ago? Do ye see any cause ta' spare his miserable life from the justice me people deserve?"

Chapter 986: Diarmuid's Decision (Part One)

For a moment, Diarmuid hesitated. This wasn't proper. The list of crimes that Ian Hanrahan had just been accused of had just grown explosively in length. To the trained inquisitor, each one would need to be documented and investigated. It wasn't just important in order to hold the baron accountable for what sounded like a litany of abuses of his power as a lord, but to prevent others from escaping justice while the baron became a convenient scapegoat for other criminals.

And yet... Between the intense, bloodthirsty aura radiating off the woman sitting on the throne and the equally bloodthirsty and aggrieved mood of the common people gathered in the great hall, Diarmuid didn't feel confident in asking for time to investigate all of these crimes. Doing so would only drag things on for months while he investigated, and if he was honest with himself, it would change nothing in the end.

It might, however, give an opportunity for the disgraced baron to rally some kind of support, to be freed from the dungeons where he would be kept while the investigations dragged on...

"So this is Lady Heila's test," Diarmuid whispered to himself as he reached the crossroads of a decision. He could insist on the time to investigate, to do things the right way and see that justice was done. If he did so, it would draw an unmistakable line in the sand between the vampire knight who set herself upon a throne and the Church, making it clear that the Church would not bow down to her authority or her threats.

It would change nothing for Baron Hanrahan. Diarmuid was under no illusions that he could stop the powerful vampire from taking her cousin's life if she wished to. Any objection that he made would be for the sake of protecting the Church, demonstrating its enduring moral authority and serving as what might be a final act of defiance against the demon conquest.

Or, he could endorse Dame Sybyll's judgment now, and in doing so, provide a stamp of legitimacy to her rule from the Church. It would go far beyond a statement that Ian Hanrahan was guilty. It would be a heretical statement of the highest order that an Inquisitor of the Church could serve on a demon's court and render judgment of the guilty on behalf of a demon.

"Dame Sybyll," Diarmuid said, standing up as straight and tall as he could as he addressed the woman on the throne. "What will you do once you have the list of crimes that Ian Hanrahan's son's provide? Will you post them in the town square for all to see?"

"No, I won't do that," Sybyll said firmly. "His victims include women who may not be safe from their own husbands if it were to be known that my cousin had spoiled them," she explained. "But there's restitution to be made for those who were wronged by him, and I'll use those lists to find his victims, one by one, and make them whole as best I can."

"Some things," she said solemnly. "Some things can never be made whole. No bag of gold is large enough to make up for what a man does to a woman when he forces himself on her, and no amount of food today can make up for years spent suffering and starving," she continued in a voice that carried incomparable sorrow and pain borne of her own years of suffering and struggle. "I can't bring back what's missing and what's dead."

Her words hung over the crowd like a dark cloud, pierced by rays of light. Dame Sybyll didn't pretend that everything could be made right again and she knew painfully well that some things, once they'd been broken, could never be fixed. She didn't lie to her people, nor did she pretend that opening up the treasury and spilling out gold would make up for what her cousin had done.

But when she promised to do what she could, the people in the crowd didn't hear the proclamation of a distant, imperious lord sitting on high. Even though she sat upon a gilded throne, they heard a woman who was one of them, who had suffered with them in the same ways they had, because of the same men... And despite that suffering, or perhaps because of it, she promised to do what she could.

Diarmuid had sat in judgment over many noblemen, from wayward knights to the sons of powerful counts, and he had known many lords who wielded the power of high justice. But in Dame Sybyll, perhaps for the first time, he found someone truly worthy of sitting on that throne. The thought shook him to his core, but if he set aside the fact of her vampiric nature, then he was left looking at a woman who defined the Church's ideals in nearly every way.

Dame Sybyll had been given one hardship after another, and yet she met her struggle the way the Church said a lord must. She rose up above vengeance and sought justice. She waged war but pleaded for the weaker side to surrender instead of giving way to slaughter. She held a trial for the guilty instead of cleanly executing the man who had wronged her. And now, she had won the hearts of her people, not because of the name she was born with, but because she understood how they had suffered, and she promised to do what she could.

"You may not be able to make everyone whole," Diarmuid said in a voice that was filled with genuine respect. "But you intend to do everything that a lord should do when his people have been so badly wronged," Diarmuid said, turning away from Dame Sybyll to look briefly at Head Priest Germot and Loman Lothian.

Neither man looked happy with the Inquisitor though Loman seemed resigned to the way things were playing out. Germot, on the other hand, had his face set in a scowling mask of disapproval and he shook his head ever so slightly when he noticed Diarmuid looking his way.

Clearly, the Head Priest knew what Diarmuid was about to do and something about the look in his eyes promised trouble in the days to come if they all survived this night, but Diarmuid couldn't bring himself to care. He made up his mind to protect people the instant he focused on healing acolytes in the gatehouse instead of rushing to unleash his flames on the demons and he reaffirmed that decision when he chose surrender instead of fighting to the bitter end.

Now, he made the same decision for a third time. To do what would preserve the most lives, whether it was the thing his superiors in the Church would have ordered him to do or not. The Holy Lord of Light had revealed ugly truths this night... now, Diarmuid put his faith in the Holy Lord above to continue illuminating his path forward, even if it led away from the Church he had known for most of his life.

"You do not need the blessing of the Inquisition on your judgment, Dame Sybyll," Diarmuid finally said after a long pause. "Nor can I give the Inquisition's blessing to a demon, no matter how much you have been wronged by your cousin and his father."

"But if you ask for my verdict," Diarmuid continued as he addressed the crimson haired vampire. "Then I judge Ian Hanrahan guilty of magnicide. I am convinced that he knew that your mother was Baroness Caitlin and he had her killed in order to preserve his rule," he said firmly. "I'm further convinced that he is guilty of numerous high and low crimes against both his people and his liege lord," he added.

"HERETIC! BLASPHEMY!"

The words echoed across the hall like thunder, shouted by a red-faced Head Priest who had clearly reached the limit of what he could endure.

"You have made a mockery of everything the Inquisition stands for!" Germot shouted as he pointed a trembling finger at Inquisitor Diarmuid. "You have sold your soul to the demons to save your own life and you have stamped this farce of a trial with your seal in defiance of all that is holy!"

Spit flew from the older priest's lips as he berated the Inquisitor on the dais and everyone sitting near him in the great hall moved quickly to the side, leaving the space around the golden-robed priest clear as he made his bold declaration.

"You have defiled the robes you wear, Diarmuid," Germot said as he strode forward to stand before the dais, coming as close to Loman Lothian as he dared. "And I. WILL. NOT. HAVE IT!"

Chapter 987: Diarmuid's Decision (Part Two)

"I. WILL. NOT. HAVE IT!"

Head Priest Germot's declaration rang off the stone walls of the great hall like the pronouncement of an angry god, and faint golden light gathered around him as he summoned up all of his courage and faith to make a final stand against the evil demons who had invaded his home and threatened to corrupt his church.

The Head Priest had soaked in the prayers of the faithful for many hours tonight, and his body brimmed with vigor in a way that it only did on high holy days when he could gather the voices of a vast congregation in prayer. Now, he drew upon that reserve of faith, wrapping it around himself like a radiant robe or a holy suit of armor to ward off the influence of demons.

He had hoped and prayed during the entire 'trial' of Baron Hanrahan that the Inquisitor was only biding his time, looking for an opportunity to strike at the demons from within their ranks, but that didn't seem to be the case at all. So now, he would need to rally the faithful once again if there was to be any hope of striking down the demons who were preparing to lord over them.

"STAND DOWN, GERMOT!" Diarmuid roared, striding forward to the edge of the dais, desperate to salvage the delicate peace that Dame Sybyll had worked so hard to create before it could shatter. "You have no right to chastise me, and even less right to speak here and now! If you have doubts in your heart, then..."

"DECIEVER!" Germot shouted, unwilling to let the tarnished Inquisitor poison the hearts of the faithful with his clever words and excuses. "Disciple Loman," Germot said, turning to the shackled lord as he made his most desperate move. "You offered me a chance to be an arrow in your quiver before. Let me take your offer now. With all the faithful gathered here as an offering, -HERK!-"

-CRACK!-

Before Germot could coordinate any kind of attack with Loman Lothian, Heila's whip struck out like a bolt of lightning, wrapping around the red-faced priest's throat and choking off anything he might have said. Then, as the willow whip grew tighter, the faint golden aura around the head priest began to flicker and fade while his face slowly turned from red to dark purple as the priest's hands flailed uselessly at the whip around his neck.

"Inquisitor Diarmuid is a good man," Heila said as she stood from her seat on the dais and walked forward to stand next to the crimson-robed Inquisitor. As she walked, the whip in her hand grew shorter, maintaining its perfect tension around Germot's throat even as she drew closer to the man.

"It is the holy calling of the Inquisition to delve into darkness and seek truth where it has been hidden," Heila said, borrowing Ignatious's words and giving them to the crowd now. "Diarmuid has listened to testimony, challenged lies, seen deceit, and witnessed truth. It is the duty of the Inquisition to punish the wicked," she added as she swept her gaze over the stunned, speechless crowd. "Tonight, you all heard how wicked Ian Hanrahan is, and Diarmuid agrees that he is guilty of crimes."

"He is a good man," she repeated, yanking forward on her whip and sending Germot tumbling to the ground as she retrieved her whip and allowed the purple-faced Head Priest to breathe at last. "And he's under my protection," Heila said as she glowered at the priest on the floor, as he lay gasping for air like a fish out of water.

"Lady Heila," Diarmuid said, blinking in surprise at the fierceness with which the diminutive witch had defended not only him but his faith as well. "Thank you," he said, bowing deeply to the witch who had intervened on his behalf.

There was a part of him that wanted to follow up with a statement that he could have settled Germot himself, but when he thought about the indiscriminate slaughter that Disciple Loman's luminous arrows unleashed in the west gate plaza just hours ago and the horrible price that had been paid to do it, he found himself less certain that he could have prevented another tragedy.

If Germot had offered up the lives of the faithful to empower Loman's Sacred Bow of Stars once again, then who knew how many would die in the great hall tonight, or how much blood would be spilled before the powerful disciple could be stopped again. Heila's non-lethal attack had prevented that, and further, she'd prevented Diarmuid from needing to fully commit to the demons by fighting on their side.

"Thank you," he repeated softly, giving the diminutive witch a smile that contained all of the gratitude he felt in his heart. "But now we have another mess to tend to," he said with a heavy sigh as he turned back to face the fallen priest, where he lay on the floor next to Loman's proud and defiant figure.

Throughout the entire evening, Loman hadn't said a word, nor had he moved a single step from the place where he stood. His robes hung in tatters, and his body was covered with bruises and dried blood, but he kept his hands clasped before him as though nothing in the world could intrude on the solitude he sought when he bowed his head and turned toward his faith.

Now, with Germot lying at his feet and gasping for air, Loman moved at last, slowly lowering himself to kneel beside the priest who was slowly regaining his normal complexion.

"May I heal him, Dame Sybyll?" Loman asked calmly, looking up at the crimson-haired vampire with a defiant spark in his eyes that said he was anything but defeated. He'd simply been biding his time while Sybyll addressed her grievances with Ian Hanrahan.

From what Loman had seen of the man thus far, he was in complete agreement that the man should be punished for the crimes he'd committed. If he'd been asked, then as a member of the Lothian Court, he might even have spoken up to condemn the fallen baron, particularly when Loman heard how many women Ian Hanrahan seemed to have laid his hands on. But there had been no need to make a move to see justice done against one of the most corrupt and callous lords Loman had ever encountered, and so he held his tongue and waited for the right time to make his move.

"I know how painful Lady Heila's whip can be," he added with a hint of a self-deprecating smile tugging at the corner of his lips as he raised his chained hands to gesture at his own wounds. "I can at least ease Germot's pain," he offered.

Loman's offer was a trap, and he was curious to see if the plainly spoken demon sitting on the gilded throne would be clever enough to notice it. She'd cloaked herself in the aura of a woman wronged, and at the same time, transformed her suffering into a source of compassion for the people.

Now, if she wanted to maintain her aura of magnanimity, she would have to give Loman permission to summon his powers again, or else suffer a crack in the carefully constructed persona she chose to present to the common people of Hanrahan.

"Stay yer hand, little lord," Sybyll said before turning to face the pair of young women who stood attentively at the base of the dais. "Cossot, Roseen," Sybyll said sweetly. "Lady Heila carries several potions tha' can help an injured man recover, an ease his pain besides. Fetch goblets fer her medicines an' give a cup ta' Lord Loman an' tha' Head Priest."

"If they can'a accept tha' kindness an' grace of a witch," she said. "Then on their heads it be."

"Yes, your ladyship!" Cossot said, nearly shoving Roseen in the direction of the single table at the back of the hall where wine and refreshments waited, should any member of the court require them, while Cossot herself approached the diminutive witch who shone almost as brightly in the young woman's eyes as Dame Sybyll herself did.

"Inquisitor Diarmuid," Dame Sybyll said formally while the young women rushed to follow her instructions. "I thank ye, fer yer fairness and yer honesty t'night. Lesser men," she said with a dark look toward Head Priest Germot, "could not have done what ye did."

"Now, I've kept tha' good people of Hanrahan in me hall long enough," Sybyll said as she gestured for Diarmuid to return to his seat. "It's time they hear me judgment, and learn what their future holds," she said with a smile that fell away when her gaze turned to the Lothian lord in his dark robes.

"Once tha' people have returned ta their homes an' their beds," Sybyll added in ominous tones. "We can address tha' actions of Lord Loman an' tha' Church t'night," she declared. "But it falls ta' witches an' sorcerers ta' sit in judgment over their own kind," she said, bowing her head to Heila, Lord Jalal and Young Lord Hauke. "So in their matter, I will plead me case, but I will no judge."

"So Lord Loman," Sybyll said with a faint smile as Cossot approached him with a pewter goblet filled with a blend of Heila's herbal scented concoctions. "I'd be on yer best behavior when ye consider tha' kindness of Lady Heila in sparin' yer life an' treatin' yer wounds... Me leavin' ye in her hands after what ye did ta' me friend Jalal is tha' last mercy ye'll get from me."

Chapter 988: The Barony Has Fallen

It took time to restore order after the dramatic confrontation sparked by Head Priest Germot. The people were all agitated, and many realized how close they had come to an outbreak of fighting right here in the great hall.

Sybyll wanted to remove Loman and Germot, along with Ian and Bastian, in order to speak to her people in peace, but she didn't trust the men from the Church out of her sight at the moment. Right now, the safest place to keep them was here, under the collective noses of her most powerful champions.

That would change once she and Heila dealt with them, but until then, Germot joined with the captive Hanrahans and Loman in chains, watched closely by the soldiers of the Second Army and the people on the dais alike.

In order to calm the crowd, Sybyll put her two new attendants to work, sending Cossot and Roseen, along with a pair of bearish servants from the Vale of Mists, to fetch the largest kegs of ale they could find in the keep's stores. In the meantime, while the harried young women passed out tankard after tankard of Ian Hanrahan's most expensive ale, Sybyll prepared her own props to address the crowd with.

Finally, the moment to address her people arrived, with only a few hours remaining before dawn would force Sybyll to retreat into a darksteel-lined daybed, secure in the very same underground dungeons where her prisoners would be confined.

"People of Hanrahan," Sybyll said as she stood from the throne and strode forward to stand between two small chests. "I know ye're tired. Some of ye are scared, an that's nottin' ta' be shamed fer. T'night, tha' Barony o' Hanrahan fell. Many were wounded an' some lost their lives on both sides of tha' fight," she said, bowing her head low and pouring out several drops of ale on the ground as an offering for the fallen.

"I promise ye justice fer tha crimes me cousin has committed, against me an' against all of ye," Sybyll promised solemnly. "I will no take his life before a crowd, but his head will adorn a spear in tha' town square by an hour after sunrise, an tha' crows may pick clean his bones," she swore.

Here and there in the crowd, a scattering of people cheered, with some dropping to their knees to thank the Crimson Knight for seeing justice done for their missing or lost loved ones. Others, however, kept their lips pressed tight together, waiting to hear the fate that awaited them after the old baron died.

"But it takes more an' a fallen enemy ta' start anew," Sybyll said firmly. "First, we must sweep away tha' old, an' so we have. Her Dominion sent her Second Army wit' me ta' take back me home, but I didn'a just come ta' lay claim ta' Hanrahan Keep or this town. T'night, while tha' Second Army fought here, tha' Third Army laid claim ta' every village in Hanrahan save fer Raek Village, as Sir Carwyn has already sworn his sword and his lands ta' me cause."

"My village!" Sir Thorryn shouted as he shot to his feet. "My wife and home..."

"Tha' Eldritch are not in tha' habit o' slayin' innocents," Sybyll reminded the panicked knight. "Ye have only ta' look around this hall ta' know that. So long as they didn'a do somethin' foolish," she said with a pointed look at the shackled Head Priest. "Then yer people are safe under tha' protection of Commander Tausau's men."

"Protection?" Sir Thorryn said as he wrapped his arms around his daughter, Drema. The young lady was already trembling in his arms as worry that she'd held at bay all night long finally pricked the bubble she'd formed around her heart. Here in the keep, she was safe, and the demons around Dame Sybyll didn't seem to be hostile.

For the past few hours, she'd let herself believe that everything would be all right and that her father was wrong to mistrust the woman who had only attacked them because she'd been forced to. But she'd

never imagined that the very same woman whom she'd defended to her father would also send demons to attack her home!

Now, her knees went weak, and her mind reeled in confusion as she no longer knew what to believe. Only her father's strong arms wrapping around her kept her from falling to the floor as the world seemed to fall away beneath her feet.

"Protection from what?" Thorryn demanded as he pulled Drema close to his chest. "From the demons who came to raid us? Weren't those just more of your own men? Our villages were safe when we left them," he said as the anxiety in his heart began to gallop faster than the warhorse he wished he could mount to ride back home this very instant.

"My wife was safe when I left her," he said softly, wishing for the first time since this nightmare began that he'd brought his wife along with his daughter to visit Hanrahan Town when he brought their autumn tithe. If he had, then even if his village burned to the ground, at least his family would still be whole...

In the wake of Dame Sybyll's attack on Hanrahan Town, no one had thought too much about the smaller raids. The sudden arrival of an organized demon army that attacked with overwhelming strength, followed by the revelation that they were led by the daughter of Baron Brighton, had driven thoughts about other recent events out of their minds.

But now that they thought about it, Dame Sybyll's forces hadn't contained any of the demons they'd heard described by the survivors of those raids. There were no armored serpent demons, nor flat tailed demon archers, nor even any of the twisted, misshapen ones who were said to have attacked the Dunns' hamlets to the north.

Instead, she brought entirely new horrors, giants, wolves, and armored boars that the people of Hanrahan had never even heard of before. So was Thorryn right? Were the raiders more of Dame Sybyll's own men? Or were they what Lord Loman had once suggested, a different faction entirely that Dame Sybyll was promising to protect them from?

No one was certain, and like Sir Thorryn, their hearts thundered in their chests, desperate for the answers that only the woman in crimson could provide...

Chapter 989: Leaving The Kingdom of Gaal

The entire great hall felt like they were balanced on the edge of a knife between hope and despair, and the slightest breeze could send them tumbling to either side. Dame Sybyll had sent an army to seize control of the villages of Hanrahan Barony, but she did it in the name of protection. The only question was, protection from who? Or what?"

"Protection from men like him," Sybyll said, pointing at the bound and gagged former baron of Hanrahan. "Or like him," she added, pointing at Head Priest Germot. "Men who would lead ye in ta' trouble an' strife. Or men like him, an' his family of murderers," she added, pointing at Loman Lothian. "Men who would drag ye in ta' wars ye have no need of fightin'," she said in a voice that dripped with scorn.

"Ask yerself, if ye know yer history," Sybyll said as she swept her crimson gaze over the people in the great hall. "B'fore t'night, when is tha' last time an Eldritch Lord or Lady descended on yer homes wit an army at their backs? Who was it in tha' War of Inches who led yer fathers an' grandfathers off ta' die on tha' slopes of Airgead Mountain? An' why did they do it?"

No one spoke to answer Sybyll's question, but no one needed to. Every eye in the room had already turned to look at the bound and shackled forms of Ian Hanrahan, Loman Lothian, and Head Priest Germot.

The Head Priest might only have been an acolyte at the time, but his predecessor had given fiery sermons from the pulpit, exhorting the people to take up arms and drive the demons from their lands. Loman Lothian hadn't even been born yet, but his father, Bors Lothian, had been the one to call upon the barons to send their best and strongest fighting men to seize the riches of Airgead Mountain. In exchange, he promised them all rich rewards, expanded lands and greater titles if they could expand the border of his domain.

And most importantly to the people in the great hall, there had been Baron Ian Hanrahan, sending out his knights while he hunkered down in his keep to 'defend the supply lines' and 'administer to the logistics of war', all the while, lining his own pockets with the profits of battles fought on the slopes of the distant mountain.

"But it is true," Sybyll continued once she'd made her point. "Tha' Third Army did take from ye what weren't theirs, an' there's a grievance there ta' be addressed," she said as she bent down to pick up the first of the two chests.

"Me father paid twice tha' price fer tha' best of yer harvests," Sybyll said loudly. "Her Dominion took what we needed from ye by force, but her war isn't wit' tha' common folk. For what she took, she'll pay twice tha' price," the crimson-haired vampire said, opening the chest to reveal stacks of silver and even a scattering of gold coins stamped with strange emblems that resembled coiling serpents.

"She'll pay twice tha' price fer what we took, an' twice again as an apology fer tha' takin'," Sybyll explained. "It don't make it right, an' any who were hurt in tha' raids, or who lost wagons, horses, or anythin' else, can come ta' tha' keep in tha' days ta' come ta' discuss how we'll make amends."

Throughout the great hall, people felt like they'd been thrown into an incomparably deep pit of despair when Sybyll told them about the attacks on their villages, only to be lifted high atop a mountain of gold and silver colored dreams when she spoke of paying the Baron's Bounty for everything that was taken from the caravans, whether it had been the best of the harvest or not.

In fact, some of the merchants in town, who hadn't been the victims of the raids, found themselves jealous of the farmers who would receive four times the value of their harvests just for the inconvenience of losing them in a raid. It wasn't until Sybyll reminded them that those people may have been hurt or worse that they clamped down on their envy.

Others in the crowd, however, realized that there was a second chest next to Dame Sybyll, and their minds began to fill once again with gold and silver colored fantasies of what that chest might contain and what it would mean for their fortunes.

"Dame Sybyll," Diarmuid said from his seat on the dais. "When you say that 'Her Dominion' is offering this restitution, you mean the Great Witch, the one you called the Mother of Trees, intends to provide for the people of Hanrahan?"

"Ye'll come ta' understand in time, Inquisitor," Sybyll said with a smile. "Fer now, it's enough ta' know her intentions, an' those intentions mark a change fer all of Hanrahan," she said as she gestured to Hauke.

The young Frost Walker lord had little to do during the proceedings thus far, but he never protested that fact. He was here as Ashlynn's apprentice, and the most important thing he could do right now was to learn. Already, the way he'd seen Dame Sybyll manage her people differed greatly from what he'd seen from his father, Lord Ritchel, and Hauke intended to discuss the differences with Lady Ashlynn at length when he returned to the Vale of Mists.

At Sybyll's command, however, the Frost Walker sorcerer finally moved, unfurling a roll of canvas that was nearly five paces long and half as wide. His horn glittered in shades of deep, icy blue as he gathered his energy, creating two pillars of ice that grew toward the great hall's ceiling like trees, carrying the giant canvas high into the air until it stood above the heads of everyone on the dais.

A moment later, a halo of shifting blue, green, and violet lights surrounded the canvas, revealing a giant map that covered all of Hanrahan Barony, but extended far beyond the borders of the barony to encompass almost the entirety of Airgead Mountain, along with all the lakes, rivers, hills, and valleys in between. It was a vast swath of territory, three or perhaps four times the size of what the Hanrahans had ruled over in generations past.

Those with keen eyes noticed that the borders of this map extended farther south, east, and even north as well, encompassing lands that had been considered either too close to the Vale of Mists to risk developing as well as lands that lay in the middle distance between Hanrahan Barony and the villages that gave their loyalty directly to the Lothian Marquis.

"This is the future of Hanrahan," Sybyll said proudly. "Not as vassals of the Kingdom of Gaal, but as vassals of Her Eternity, the Harbinger of Death, and Her Dominion, the Mother of Trees. No longer will the people of Hanrahan bleed themselves out in deadly raids, chasing after wealth on Airgead Mountain," she said, lifting up the second chest and turning to face Lord Jalal.

For a moment, the two felt like they were alone on the dais. This moment had stretched out between them for more than twenty years while they danced with death under the starlight. Now, it would finally come to an end...

Chapter 990: Surrendering A Throne

"Come here, me old friend," Sybyll said warmly, gesturing for the feline lord of Airgead Mountain to join her at the edge of the dais. "I should be givin' this back ta ye," she said as her eyes tightened when they fell on the stump where Jalal's left arm had been.

"You told me to stay with my drummers and watch from afar," Jalal reminded her. "I was the one who insisted on joining the dance tonight. I can't complain when my partner is a little rough with me in the dance," he said with a slow, languid smile, as if it didn't bother him to have lost a limb.

But Sybyll knew the truth that lurked behind those sleepy, feline eyes. Without a knife in each hand, he could never defend his position as Eldritch Lord of Airgead Mountain. So long as the old ways were kept, he would lose his place as lord before the snows melted. But her friend had protected his people for too long, and he'd given Sybyll herself far too much for her to see him tumble from his throne to become nothing more than a forgotten, broken warrior.

"We'll do this th' Vale's way," Sybyll said as she pulled her eyes away from the stump of his arm to look directly into his cat-like eyes. "Kneel b'fore me, old friend, an' make yer oath," she commanded.

"The throne of Airgead Mountain belongs to the one with the might to protect its people," Jalal said formally as he knelt before the woman he'd affectionately called his 'Crimson Dancer.' This day, in his mind, was long overdue, but now that he found himself here, kneeling in her own ancestral hall, he felt like he finally understood why she could never accept his throne, even when she'd earned it a thousand times over. There was another throne waiting for her, and he couldn't relinquish his until she was able to claim her own.

"For twenty years and more, you have been the strongest defender of Airgead Mountain, yet you've allowed me to sit upon the throne of my ancestors," he continued in a clear and powerful voice that echoed off the walls of the stone hall. "The stars have witnessed your strength and your courage, and I can no longer cling to the illusion that I am strong enough to hold my throne or defend my people."

"My throne is yours for the taking," he said as he puffed up his chest and placed the claws of his remaining hand over his heart. "And my life as well if you wish it. Please, my friend. Take up the throne of Airgead Mountain and protect my people from the dangers that threaten them. Defend our sacred spaces and allow our nation to dance freely beneath the stars until the stars themselves tumble from the sky."

It was the first time that anyone had ever seen a demon lord surrender or submit and for a moment, everyone shared the same glimpse of something that was both utterly alien and profoundly familiar. The words were strange, and no human lord would ever dream of caring for the people of a defeated demon if one were to surrender to them and yet...

Dame Sybyll and Lord Jalal addressed each other as friends. They had fought side by side, and when one of them was too badly wounded to continue to lead his people, he turned to his closest friend and surrendered his throne to her so that she could continue on in his stead.

It was strange, and foreign, and heartrendingly beautiful.

"I'll take yer life," Sybyll said with equal formality as she reached out with a sharp, blood red fingernail to trace a small crimson line down the center of Jalal's forehead. "But I will not end it. I have need of ye at me side, old friend, an' I will not see yer life wasted."

"Blood Pact: The Mark of Kinship," she said as she sliced open the tip of her own finger and spilled a single drop of blood on the shallow wound on Jalal's forehead. "Ye are as me own kin, an' no one may treat ye otherwise," she continued formally. "From t'day forward, ye will be known as Jalal Hanrahan, an' ye will serve as me Lord Marshal until Her Dominion sees fit ta grant us both other titles."

"I need yer help, old friend," she said as she took his hand and helped him to his feet. "There is much ta' be done during the day when I sleep, an' there's no one I trust more ta' watch over all our people than ye. Can I count on ye, Jalal Hanrahan?" Sybyll asked with a dazzling smile on her crimson lips.

"Of course you can count on me," Jalal said as he stood, chuckling at the notion that his old friend had decided to hang a human surname on him. The mark she'd bestowed on him was more than enough to identify them as kin to anyone who knew how to look, but since these humans placed so much importance on names and the people who had inherited the right to carry them, he supposed it wasn't a bad thing.

"I've even brought a gift," he said with a grin that revealed his sharp, pointy teeth. With Sybyll's help, Jalal opened the lid on the second chest, dipping his hand in to scoop out dozens of roughly cut gemstones that glittered in the shifting, colorful lights emanating from Hauke's sorcery. "These are for the rebuilding of Hanrahan Town, and for building roads between the mountain and the valleys. Take them as the first tithe from the villages of Airgead Mountain so together we may thrive."

Toward the back of the dais, Hauke watched the ceremony unfold with a bittersweet, knowing smile that few present could truly understand. Just weeks ago, he had surrendered his claim to the throne of the High Pass, rejecting Ashlynn's offer to relinquish it to him at the end of his exile and pleading for her to take up the defense of his people instead.

Now, Jalal became the second Eldritch Lord to cede territory to the Vale of Mists. The addition of those two territories alone, combined with the lands between them and Hanrahan Barony, would be enough to see Lady Nyrielle raised to the stature of a High Lady under Eldritch customs, but he knew that she and Mother Ashlynn had their sights set far beyond the conquest of a few Eldritch lands and a single human-held barony.

By the time they were done, Hauke wondered how many other lords would join him and Jalal in the circle of lords who had chosen the Vale of Mists to act as their shield against the expansion of the Kingdom of Gaal and the hatred of the Church of the Holy Lord of Light.

"There is a larger world fer ye ta find," Sybyll said with a smile as she looked into the glittering eyes of the merchants, craftsmen, and leaders of Hanrahan who were finally starting to understand the real, tangible benefits that could come from cooperation with the Eldritch.

"After t'night, ye'll find new partners ta' trade wit', not just on Airgead Mountain, but in tha' Vale of Mists, tha' Southern Steppe, an' past tha' mountains in tha' High Fen an' beyond."

"If ye have an open heart," she said, placing a hand over her bosom. "An' ye can keep yer minds open ta' things that are different than what ye've known, than this is will be tha' darkest night of yer lives, followed by tha' dawn of somethin' greater than ye can imagine."