

# The Vampire 991

## Chapter 991: The Power of Love (Part One)

"My father won't stand for this," Loman said from the ground beneath the dais. "The whole of the march will rise up against you if you try to tear one of his baronies away from him, and even the king may send soldiers against you," he warned, his voice acting like a bucket of cold water thrown on the dreaming people in the audience, waking them violently from their dreams.

"You aren't leading your people into a brighter future," he said defiantly. "You're ushering in the beginnings of an even more terrible war!"

"Yer father hardly matters," Sybyll said coldly from atop the dais. "That is, if yer brother hasn't killed him yet," she said, shocking the young Lothian Lord. "Don't act so surprised. Ye must know yer father hasn't been well," Sybyll said, ushering in a new hush among the people as she revealed a secret known to very few outside the nobility and virtually no one in the great hall.

"Yer brother bought three doses of Nightweaver Venom, what ye call Spider Demon Poison, from a man called the Black Merchant," Sybyll explained. "He used two o' them ta' poison tha' wife an' child o' Sir Tommin Pyre," she said with a predatory grin that revealed her fangs. "I imagine ye'd know why yer brother might want ta' take some petty revenge against his former retainer."

"No, no he wouldn't," Loman said in a fragile, frail voice as his eyes shook in disbelief. "My brother is ruthless, but he would never..."

"Would never what?" Sybyll taunted. "Harm an innocent woman? I think ye know good an' well who he sent his knights in ta tha' forest ta' bury tha' night of his wedding. Did ye think tha' Mother of Trees herself wouldn't know of it?"

"Tha' people of Hanrahan have nottin' ta' fear from tha' Lothian March or tha' Church," Sybyll proclaimed confidently. "By winter's end, tha' whole of tha' march will have fallen or surrendered to tha' Vale of Mists. Our days as a small, embattled territory at the edge of a kingdom are over," Sybyll explained. "By winter's end, we'll be tha' new heartland, an our only enemies will be tha' ones who harbor hatred in their hearts ta' turn their blades 'gainst their own neighbors."

"This is what the Mother of Trees wishes to end," Heila said, striding forward to the edge of the dais and looking down at Loman Lothian. "For a hundred years, each new Lothian Marquis has thrown a whole

new generation of young men into one war after another, and for what? Are you richer? Are your lives easier than they were before the War of Inches or any of the wars that went before that?"

"I grew up in the Vale of Mists," Heila said, placing a hand over her chest and lowering her head for a moment, hiding behind the brim of her simple Traveling Hat while she wrestled with how much she should say. This was Dame Sybyll's moment but she couldn't stand the way Loman had tried to spoil it by giving everyone something new to be afraid of. So, instead, she decided to give them a piece of the truth and a piece of hope for the future along with it.

"I grew up in the Vale of Mists but I wasn't born a witch," Heila said as she lifted her head and revealed grass green eyes that brimmed with emotion. "Last winter, I was still a maid in the castle and the closest I had come to war was a crush on a young soldier. I, I never said anything to him about it," she admitted in embarrassment. "I was afraid that a war would come soon and I would lose him, so I set my sights elsewhere."

"By the time love found me, I'd become a witch and my life was nothing like I'd dreamed it would be," she said, looking down at Cossot and Roseen before casting her gaze out toward Drema and the other young women in the crowd. "I found love on a battlefield when my lady was in danger and the only person who might be able to rescue her was an Inquisitor who carried a Holy Flame Blade," she said.

The instant she said it, Diarmuid sat up stiffly in his chair while his mind struggled to think of which High Inquisitor could have come anywhere near the Vale of Mists to meet the diminutive witch. But the Inquisition hadn't sent such a powerful figure out to Lothian March in at least twenty years since the last war, and the witch claimed that she'd only been a witch for a year...

"He nearly died in order to free my lady from a trap," Heila continued, plunging ahead with her story after taking a deep breath. "I nearly died healing his wounds. You may not know, but when a witch heals someone else's wounds, they feel the pain of those wounds all at once..."

"Wait, Lady Heila," Sir Niall said, shaking off the shock of hearing that a witch was in love with an Inquisitor as he heard her say something even more shocking. "When you healed the soldiers in the plaza, you healed everyone who was hurt... Two of my villagers are still alive because of what you did," he said in a town that carried immense gratitude. "But you had to suffer the pain of their wounds to save their lives?"

"It was worth it," Heila said with a sad smile. "It's what the Mother of Trees would have done, and it was the only way to stop the fighting. And what I did, it was only a little healing," Heila added as she looked

out over the crowd. "In the morning, after the sun rises, I'll take everyone who is injured into the forest and I'll give them the best healing that I'm able to," she said, giving Jalal a briefly apologetic look. "Some things can't be mended, but I'll do what I can."

"No one could ask you for any more than that, Lady Heila," Jalal said with a deep bow. "I'd be dead without what you did for me, so I'm already grateful beyond words."

## Chapter 992: The Power of Love (Part Two)

By now, the diminutive witch had completely captivated the audience. Already, their hearts had quaked and shivered in sympathy and a sort of collective mourning for Dame Sybyll's lost parents. Only a few people in the hall still remembered Baron Brighton and Baroness Caitlin, but even the ones who didn't know them still felt the tragedy of their loss and Sybyll's suffering personally.

Now, after watching the dreaded Demon Lord of Airgead Mountain calling Dame Sybyll a friend and swearing fealty to her, they were listening to a demon witch telling them a tale of love with the most unlikely of suitors. But when they learned how she'd suffered the pain of the wounded soldiers in order to save their lives, whether they were friends or foes, they found themselves nodding along at the unlikely pairing.

After all, Lady Heila had already reminded them that Inquisitors sought truth, and if she had a heart that was so filled with love and compassion that she would heal even her enemies on the battlefield, taking the pain of their wounds on herself...

Then how was this 'demon witch' any different from the Exemplars and Saints of the Church? If anyone could ever match up to a High Inquisitor, shouldn't it be a woman as worthy of worship as Lady Heila?

"A-anyway," Heila said awkwardly, blushing furiously at the praise directed her way from so many people. "The Inquisitor I healed, he was wounded to the depths of his soul," Heila said as she resumed her story. "So, to heal him, I had to touch his heart. That's when I learned that he was the kindest, warmest man I'd ever met and... I fell in love."

"He's waiting for me in the Vale of Mists," Heila said, smiling as she thought of returning to the embrace of the only vampire she'd ever met who never felt cold to her. "I hope my father isn't giving him a hard time for staying home while I'm here. Father insists that he court me for a year before he proposes, and he's very protective of me," she explained quickly.

As soon as she said it, the tension in the room broke, and several of the fathers in the room found themselves laughing along with the diminutive witch as they tried to imagine the sort of man who dared to become the father-in-law to a High Inquisitor. But then, if his daughter were a miracle-working witch, he must be one of the greatest horned demons to ever live. Or if not, a few men thought, he'd better claim to be lest his son-in-law get out of hand!

"You see it, though, don't you?" Heila asked the crowd. "He didn't abandon his faith for me. His Holy Flame Blade still burns in his hands when he wields it, even though he loves a witch. You don't have to give up your faith either," she said, looking directly at Loman and Germot.

"The only things you need to give up are your hatred and your fear," Heila said. "I know it may be the hardest struggle you will ever face, but it's the only one that will end the bloodshed and violence. It's hard enough to find love without a war tearing husbands from wives, fathers from children, and whole families away from their villages. Wouldn't it be better to struggle to understand each other, and to find ways to live together?"

She said it gently, but Heila's words fell on the clergymen's hearts like a blow from her whip, laying their faith bare and throwing their inadequacies back in their faces. Never in their lives had Loman or Germot imagined that a demon-witch would stand above them, preaching about finding a greater struggle and rising to meet it.

Germot's face twisted in anger at the heresy of it all and he looked ready to launch a scathing retort only to stop when he felt Loman's hand on his shoulder and saw the battered disciple shaking his head.

Loman heard nothing but love, affection, and longing for a brighter world in the voice of the diminutive witch. If he'd closed his eyes, he might have mistaken her for a bright-eyed sister whose heart was pure and filled with the words of the Great Prophet without the stains of Church dogma that had piled on top of the Prophet's original words over the long centuries since his death.

He'd heard anger in that voice before, and condemnation as well when she learned that Loman's prayers had claimed the lives of seven of his own brethren and that it would claim even more without her intervention. It was a voice that challenged much of what he held true, calling into question one of the central pillars of his faith, and for that alone, he should have rejected everything it said.

And yet, looking at the sincerity in her grass-green eyes... he couldn't deny what he saw there. And when he looked at his own reflection in those same eyes, the man he saw lay in tatters that went far deeper than his torn robes.

"Lady Heila," Diarmuid said, breaking the silence that had formed following the conclusion of Heila's tale of unlikely romance. "Who is, who is the High Inquisitor who means so much to you? I don't doubt you," he added quickly. "It's just that, I thought I knew everyone who had come to the frontier from the Holy City, but I've never heard of a High Inquisitor in Lothian March since the end of the War of Inches..."

For a moment, Heila hesitated. There were reasons that they'd been so insistent on using titles rather than names. Hauke's storm had made it too cold for messenger birds to fly, but word was bound to travel sooner or later.

There were just too many people, and even with guards posted on the roads and everything else they could do, they didn't think they could stop word of Hanrahan's fall from reaching Lothian City for more than five or six days. At that point, anything that was said here could be exposed to Bors and Owain Lothian, likely before Ashlynn was ready for them to learn of her survival.

But this wasn't a story about Ashlynn, not really. It was a story about love and about faith that endured long after it should have died... and the people needed to hear it. On a night that had started with blood and death and fear, they needed to end with warmth, love and hope for their futures. So, if exposing a small secret could give them that, and help Dame Sybyll to consolidate her rule over her homeland with less bloodshed, then Heila was willing to take the risk.

"His name is Ignatious," Heila said after several moments of hesitation. Of course, the name meant nothing to most of the people present, but to Loman and Diarmuid, who had immersed themselves in every scrap of the venerated Inquisitor's writings they could lay hands to or recall in the days since the first raids were reported in the Dunn and Hanrahan baronies, the name couldn't be more familiar.

"He didn't come here during the War of Inches," Heila explained as she met Diarmuid's shocked gaze directly. "He came here after the War of Undying Demons and fought in the Brother's War. That's when the Harbinger of Death captured him and made him one of her progeny as punishment for torturing so many of her champions," Heila explained in a voice that grew quieter the more she said.

"He struggled in darkness for close to eighty years," she said softly. "But he never gave up his faith. Now he's finally come home," she said, looking from Diarmuid to Loman and back again. "And he very much wants to meet with you."

## Chapter 993: Living A Life In Service (Part One)

Heila's story of finding love in the most unlikely of places provided the perfect note to bring the late-night gathering to a close.

Sybyll promised her people that in the days to come, she would dedicate herself to helping to rebuild Hanrahan Town from the damage of the storm and the battle, and that there would be justice for the victims of her cousin, Ian Hanrahan.

She also warned her people that, for a time, travel would be forbidden. Soldiers would be posted at the gates and along the roads to ensure that no one carried word of what had happened to Lothian City or anywhere else who might attempt to destroy their fragile peace with an attempt to 'rescue' the conquered barony.

There was some grumbling about that, particularly from merchants who had been considering braving the winter weather to sell their goods in Lothian City during the Midwinter's Night celebrations. Those grumbles turned into a string of stammered prevarications when Sybyll made her counteroffer.

"Do ye think tha' longest night o' tha' year isn't a special occasion fer vampires?" Sybyll asked with a sweet smile. "If ye wish ta' bring yer goods ta' market, consider makin' a trip ta' tha' Vale of Mists. I'm sure Her Eternity would welcome ye with open arms an' Her Dominion might even make ye' an offer ta' stay in tha' city through tha' winter ta sell yer wares," she said suggestively.

Even the most ambitious among the merchants balked at the idea of traveling to the most dangerous, most forbidden region of the entire frontier, and no one was willing to immediately volunteer to make the journey.

At the same time, no one wanted to reject Dame Sybyll's offer. The inevitable result, with half a dozen merchants stumbling over themselves to 'consider it properly' and 'make decisions in the days to come' was fine with the crimson-haired vampire. It would be enough of a miracle if she could guide her people through a peaceful winter within her own borders. Anything beyond that felt like far too much to contemplate for a woman who had thought of herself as nothing more than an avenging knight for more than two decades.

While Sybyll tended to the departing townsfolk, Heila brushed off Diarmuid's questions about Ignatious, telling him that there would be plenty of time to discuss her beloved on the way to the Vale of Mists. Instead, she took the time to pull aside the only two people from among the attending townsfolk who weren't making their way toward the exit.

"I heard that your name was Cossot," Heila said, startling the slender woman who had been trying to make herself unobtrusive by the refreshment table. "I didn't hear your friend's name, though."

"I, I'm called Roseen, your ladyship, um, or, your Worship," the shorter, curvy woman said, stammering over her words in her haste to curtsy to the powerful witch.

With her head bowed low, she shot an intense glare at Cossot, as if to warn her friend from bringing up the topic of her skipped etiquette lessons after making a fool of herself trying to guess the proper way to address a witch. There was no way the old woman who taught them how to pour tea and speak to their betters would have known what they should be doing or saying right now!

"You don't need to be that formal with me," Heila said with a light laugh. "Stand up straight and hold your head up high," she said, taking a look at both young women.

There were only a few hours left before dawn, and Heila suspected that both women had started their day early in order to be ready for the feast that Ian Hanrahan held. The two women were young enough to have forced themselves to keep going, despite being awake for nearly an entire day, but the intricate braids in their hair had begun to fray, and they were already looking a touch unsteady on their feet as they rested their hands on the refreshment table for support.

"Dame Sybyll has asked a lot from you tonight," Heila said as she reached into the pouch at her waist and withdrew two small, porcelain bottles, each sealed with a tiny cork and a bit of wax. "This is no substitute for rest, but it can push back the fatigue, at least for a few more hours. Long enough to greet the dawn. Once it wears off, though, you'll sleep the day away," she explained as she gave each woman a bottle.

"Don't drink it just yet," she said when she saw Cossot mechanically working at the stopper, as if she'd lost any ability to question instructions and was simply moving on to the next task that had been put in front of her. "Sit with me," Heila said as she took a seat on the floor and tapped the cold stones beside her for the young women to join her.

"I don't want to be rude," Cossot said hesitantly as she looked at the diminutive figure of the witch on the ground. Despite the horned woman's small stature, she loomed large in Cossot's mind, rising nearly as high in her heart as Dame Sybyll herself had.

"Then don't tower over me and get down here," Heila said, a touch more sharply than she'd intended to. "All of you tall people, standing when sitting would bring us closer together. You need to learn these things," she chided as the two young women bashfully took their seats on the floor beside her.

"We don't have much time before everyone leaves, and I have questions to ask you before we start the last..." her voice trailed off as her lips twisted in an expression of distaste, as if just speaking the words filled her mouth with bitterness. "The last judgment we have to render tonight," she said solemnly.

It was clear from Heila's glance toward the captive clergymen that she was speaking about Loman and Germot, but whatever it was that she was thinking about the two men, she pushed it firmly aside to focus her attention on the two young women before her.

"Cossot," Heila said, looking directly into the young woman's hazel eyes. "Do you know why Dame Sybyll has been giving you so much work to do tonight?"

"Because I was the first one to speak up when she entered the great hall?" Cossot said hesitantly, though her tone made it sound more like a question than a statement.

"You answered a question," Heila said, frowning at the young woman. "That was all you did. How does that make you special enough to deserve so much attention from her now?"

"It... it doesn't," Cossot said, hanging her head low. Her shoulders slumped, and her entire body seemed to deflate as Heila casually popped the bubble that had buoyed the young woman's spirits the entire evening.

Now that someone was asking her, now that she finally had a moment to think about it, she realized how ridiculous she'd been behaving. Each time Dame Sybyll had given her a new task, another responsibility, even a simple order like standing at the ready in case anyone on her court needed refreshments, she felt like she was drawing closer to someone who was really special...



And in turn, she'd allowed herself to entertain fantasies that she was special, too. She'd let herself think that Dame Sybyll had seen something special in her that no one else had seen before and that maybe, just maybe, if she worked hard enough tonight, then there would be a tomorrow waiting for her when Dame Sybyll would need her help again.

But now that Lady Heila came right out and asked her what made her special enough to deserve Dame Sybyll's attention... she couldn't find anything to say at all.

"I'm no one special," Cossot admitted in defeat. "Th-thank you, for correcting me before I thought too much of myself. I, I won't..."

"You won't say another word," Heila interrupted, reaching out to the young woman and setting a hand gently on her cheek. "Since you don't know, it's up to me to explain it to you," she said as she lifted the young woman's gaze to meet her own. "And you too, Roseen," she added. "Because in a few minutes, you'll both have a decision to make, and it may be the most important decision of your lives..."

It might not be entirely fair to the pair of young women to put so much pressure on them, but Heila felt like she had little choice. When she entered Lady Ashlynn's service, she had Madame Zedya there to guide her every step of the way as she transformed from a simple maidservant into someone that Ashlynn could rely on in the same ways that Lady Nyrielle relied on Zedya.

Now, inexperienced as she was, she saw these two young women, standing at the edge of the path that she'd been walking on ever since she 'volunteered' to be Lady Ashlynn's attendant, but there was no Zedya here to guide them, and no one else who knew what it meant to dedicate yourself to the service of someone as extraordinary and powerful as Dame Sybyll was.

And so, before they could be pulled any further along the road by sheer necessity, Heila took it upon herself to ensure that it was a path they belonged on... and if it was, she promised herself that she would help them as much as she could, just like Madame Zedya had helped her.

#### Chapter 994: Living A Life Of Service (Part Two)

"...it may be the most important decision of your lives..."

Heila's words hung heavily over both young women, like an axe ready to fall on them, and Cossot and Roseen swallowed heavily as they saw the seriousness in Heila's eyes.

"Dame Sybyll worked very hard tonight," Heila started, glancing over her shoulder at the crimson-haired vampire with bone-white skin as she did her best to deliver reassurances to the departing townsfolk. "She's dressed like a lady, she's put aside her weapons, and she's restrained so much of her power that at times, you could almost mistake her for an ordinary, beautiful, young woman."

To Heila's experienced eyes, there were some things that would always mark a vampire as different. Sybyll's bone-white complexion went beyond the milky, pale shade of her mother's skin in the portrait that had been hung in the great hall, but skillful makeup diminished how shockingly pale she really was. The crimson eyes and occasional glimpses of fangs served as reminders that even inexperienced humans could see, but those faded away once people grew accustomed to them.

Rather, it was the stillness with which vampires rested, as though they no longer needed to worry about the aches and pains that came from holding a single position for too long, and the careful restraint they practiced when they did move, so they didn't accidentally break things with their tremendous strength, that gave vampires away to the people who knew them best.

Sybyll had worked hard to appear human for her people tonight, but there had been moments, exceptionally tense ones, where the mask had slipped, and if Dame Sybyll hadn't been working so hard to hold herself back, the people might never have been able to see her as the long lost daughter of Brighton and Caitlin... they would only have seen the demonic vampire sitting upon the throne.

"But when Dame Sybyll stepped into this great hall, she didn't look like an ordinary young lady," Heila continued. "She still wore her armor, still splattered with the blood of the templars she slew, and she carried an axe that contains a whisper of Her Eternity's own darkness. I'm a witch, and even I was frightened of what would happen if she reached Loman Lothian before I did," Heila admitted softly.

At this distance, even over the chatter of the crowd, the shuffling of feet, and the scuffing of chairs on the stone floor, Heila was certain that Sybyll could hear her. Ashlynn might have to concentrate to pick out a single conversation amidst the background noise, but Sybyll's physical gifts were even greater than what Ashlynn had received from Lady Nyrielle.

There was no way that the Crimson Knight would miss this conversation if she wanted to pay attention to it, but Heila forced herself to continue with all of the earnestness that made her seek out these young women to begin with.

"Were you frightened when she came in here?" Heila asked directly.

"I was," Cossot answered, biting her lower lip and looking down at the floor, unable to meet the diminutive witch's eyes when she gave her confession. "I was scared when I saw her but I thought... I thought if I could just tell her what she needed to know, that Ian Hanrahan wasn't here, then she would go away and we would all be safe..."

"And after that?" Heila asked gently. "Were you afraid when she started giving you orders?"

"Mmmm," Cossot said, reaching out to grab Roseen's hand. "That's why I dragged Roseen out from under the table where she was hiding and made her stay with me... If I wasn't alone then, then I didn't have to be so scared."

"And you, Roseen?" Heila asked. "You could have run away from your friend whenever you wanted. Why didn't you?"

"And leave her here by herself?" Roseen blurted. "Do you know how much trouble she'd get into if I left her alone!" As soon as the words escaped her lips, she clapped both hands over her mouth while her face turned bright red.

She knew that Cossot was impulsive and that her friend was easily swayed by powerful and impressive people like Loman Lothian and Dame Sybyll, and that she would throw herself into anything she thought would let her reach the forbidden lofty heights where noblemen walked, but now was hardly the time to mention it!

"That's what makes the two of you special," Heila said with a warm, reassuring smile. "Cossot, while others cowered under tables, you spoke up. You might have been frightened, terrified even, but I wasn't any different the first time I was on a battlefield. I was scared, and all I could do was hide behind Hauke's walls of ice while Tuscan Giants threw stones and hurled spears at us," she said, blushing slightly at the memory.

"Dame Sybyll is a vampire," Heila reminded the two young women as she pressed past her own embarrassing memories to make the point she needed to. "Right now, everyone is in too much shock to process what that means, but soon, she'll need to feed on people in order to survive. In the Vale, we

have a way of doing this, and people compete for the honor of making an offering to the vampires of the Vale, but your people don't have those traditions yet."

"Are you, are you saying that Dame Sybyll held on to us because she'll want to feed from us?" Cossot said. Her face had gone slightly pale, and there was a tremor in her voice when she spoke, but surprisingly, she wasn't completely horrified at the notion.

"I, I didn't know how much of a beast Ian Hanrahan was," she said a moment later. "He might have turned to me one day. Or to Roseen. We're old enough now, but neither of us is so much as betrothed. So... he could have come for us, maybe even after this feast," she said with words tumbling one after the next as she realized the danger she'd been in and never recognized.

"Dame Sybyll saved us from that," Cossot continued. "So, if she needs help. If I can help her by making an 'offering' to her, then I'll do it," she said firmly, clenching her small fist in determination. "I just, I just don't know how..."

Sitting next to her, Roseen stared at her closest friend in horror as she offered herself up to be Dame Sybyll's ... meal! It was one thing to be grateful; Roseen was also grateful for what Dame Sybyll had done. After all, once Cossot had pointed it out, it wasn't hard to realize that her friend was right about the danger they faced when they attended the banquet.

For Roseen, it had been even worse. Her father mentioned that Baron Hanrahan had been asking about her for the past several months. It was only the occasional casual mention, asking how her studies were progressing or if she'd caught the eye of any promising young men...

At the time, her father had speculated that the Baron might be looking within his own borders for a woman to marry Bastian after so many matchmaking attempts had ended in disaster. But now, she realized the truth of the Baron's 'innocent' questions. So when she thought about Dame Sybyll saving her and so many other women from Ian Hanrahan's clutches, of course, she was grateful...

But there was a difference between being grateful and becoming a vampire's dinner!

Chapter 995: Living A Life Of Service (Part Three)

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha." Heila's light, musical laughter spilled past her lips before she could hold it back, startling both young women and leaving Cossot wondering if she'd said something wrong. "When the time comes, if it ever does, Sybyll will tell you," Heila reassured them.

"And you don't have to worry that feeding a vampire is something horrible or painful," she added as her cheeks turned a faintly rosy shade of pink. "It can actually be very, um, pleasant. But what I want to ask you to do is something harder."

"Many villagers in the Vale of Mists, as well as servants, soldiers, and all manner of common folk have made offerings to the vampires of the Vale," Heila explained. "But what I want to know is if you can give Dame Sybyll a greater gift. I want to know if you're willing to dedicate your life to her service."

"Dedicate my life?" Cossot repeated with a frown. "As what? As a maidservant? I can't think of anything else I could do for her, other than maybe being a meal for her. I, I don't have many great skills beyond entertaining. I don't think she needs anyone to advise her on which wines are favored by her guests and..."

"It doesn't matter what you know now," Heila interrupted. "All that matters is what's in your heart," she said, reaching out to tap the young woman just above her humble bust. "I was a nobody when I became my Lady's chambermaid, and I felt like I'd barely done enough to redeem my blunders when she named me her lady-in-waiting."

"But my lady and Dame Sybyll have a lot in common," Heila said as she glanced toward the crimson-haired vampire who seemed to be deliberately ignoring the conversation she was having. "My lady was all alone in the Eldritch world. She had the Lady of the Vale and other vampires, but once the sun rose, it was just me and Georg, the Master of the Kitchens. She was the only human in that whole castle, and even though she never complained of it, I know that the loneliness and the isolation took a toll on her."

"But, Dame Sybyll isn't alone here," Roseen pointed out. "This is her home. She's come back to Hanrahan. We're her people, so she won't ever be alone."

"Except that she will, Roseen," Cossot said as she put together the clues Heila had been spoon-feeding them. "She's the only vampire here, and by tomorrow, there will be people who are afraid of her. In another two or three days, some people may even form a mob outside the gate with torches because they're afraid of her and the army she brought..."

"They'll take advantage of her kindness," Cossot continued. "She won't kill them... she might not even speak to them. But seeing the people she fought so hard to return to suddenly rejecting her...I can't imagine how much that would hurt after everything she's already been through."

"But the fact that you can even think of those things says that you're a very special person, Cossot," Heila said with a gentle, reassuring smile. "That's why I want to know if you can dedicate your life to serving her. I know it's sudden, and you don't have much time to think about it, but it was sudden for me too," Heila said as she remembered the night she'd been assigned as Lady Ashlynn's chambermaid.

Zedya had tricked the servants, asking who among them was willing to tend to a human noblewoman who would never become one of Lady Nyrielle's vampires. They had to be prepared to serve this strange intruder in the Vale of Mists every bit as well as they'd tend to Sir Thane of Sir Marcel, but in addition to that, they would be expected to tutor the woman in all of the different things that it meant to live in the Vale of Mists.

Then, as if that hadn't sounded unappealing enough, Zedya threatened that if the strange woman was ever unhappy with them, Lady Nyrielle would be willing to kill the offending servant on the spot. In the end, it hadn't quite come all the way down to drawing straws, but Heila had volunteered to spare the others from facing such a terrifying duty.

"I've watched you both tonight while you watched Dame Sybyll," Heila added after the tension of the moment became too great even for her to bear. "I could see respect, admiration, sorrow, and rage in your eyes when you listened to her story. Even if you've only just met her, I can tell that you care for her."

"Wouldn't anyone?" Cossot asked in surprise. "I mean, she's... She's the most amazing woman I've ever seen. No one could stand against her. Not the Church, not the Baron, not anyone. And even though she had Lord Jalal at her side," she said. "She wasn't depending on a man to come claim justice for her. She did that all on her own, with her own strength. That..."

"That's something you want for yourself," Heila said with a knowing smile. "Not because you've ever been wronged the way she has, but because you don't ever want to be... And because you don't want to see her wronged again. Am I right?"

"Yes," Cossot said, looking to Roseen to see if the other woman felt the same way.

"I, I don't know that I feel as strongly about Dame Sybyll," the curvy young woman admitted. "I'm impressed by her. Maybe even a little inspired by her. And what she went through," she said, blinking back hot tears that suddenly filled her eyes as she remembered all the wrongs Dame Sybyll had endured. "No one should ever have to go through anything like that again."

"But, if you ask me if I'd give my life to serving Dame Sybyll," she said hesitantly. "I'd sooner promise to stay with Cossot, to keep her out of trouble. I can work loyally for Dame Sybyll," she added quickly, lest the horned witch misunderstand. "But the feelings that you're talking about... they just aren't as strong in me."

"It's fine that they aren't," Heila said with an understanding nod. "Feelings take time. But since your feelings for Cossot are strong enough to remain by her side, then maybe that will be enough for you to get through what's coming next," she said.

"If you truly want to serve Dame Sybyll, then you have to face the meeting that is about to take place," Heila warned them. "The things you hear may shake your faith in the Church if you are devout believers," she cautioned the young women. "There are secrets that most people aren't ready to learn, but we have to talk about them now. If you're going to serve Dame Sybyll, you have to prove to her that you can carry the burdens of the secrets she holds."

"And... there may be violence as well," Heila said. "Loman Lothian killed people on both sides of the battle tonight, and he has to face justice for his crimes," the diminutive witch said firmly. "So, if you're prepared to face what's coming, knowing that Dame Sybyll may still reject your service in the days to come, then drink the potions I gave you and come with me."

"And if you want to go home instead," she started, only to shake her head and laugh as both women drained the small porcelain bottles to the last drop. "Good," she said instead. "Then follow me. You won't have to say anything and it's unlikely you'll need to do anything until the end, but it's important that you watch closely and listen carefully to everything that's about to be said..."

## Chapter 996: Sacred Teachings

Once the great hall had been cleared of everyone other than Sybyll's court and their prisoners, Hauke sealed the chamber, covering the empty doorway into the hall with a thick sheet of ice while a similar sheet of ice formed over the servants' entrance. Even the windows were covered over with a layer of frost that made it impossible to see through them, though there were very few places with a vantage point that would have given anyone a view.

"Thank ye, Hauke," Sybyll said with a nod of acknowledgement. Now that the townspeople had left, the powerful vampire's mannerisms had once again become more subtle, though it was clear that a low, simmering anger still burned within her whenever she looked at the bound and shackled prisoners.

"I'll be brief," the crimson-haired vampire said as she returned to her seat on the throne. "Her Dominion has already laid claim ta' Loman Lothian's life on tha' condition tha' we took him alive in tha' attack," she acknowledged. She told Lady Ashlynn at the time that she would make no promises about what would happen in battle, and she would accept no losses to preserve the Lothian Lord's life, but if they were able to capture him alive, then he would not be killed alongside Ian Hanrahan.

"But t'nigh, he killed people of Hanrahan ta' fuel his sorcery, an' I cannot easily stomach that," Sybyll continued. "There is no crime in killin' tha' soldiers of yer enemy, an' I hold no grudge fer what he did, even ta Jalal," she said, though it wasn't entirely true. It was more accurate to say that she hated him as a person for wounding her friend, but as the ruler of Hanrahan, if she let herself take vengeance on him for doing what a warrior in battle should, then how was she any different from Ian Hanrahan and his murderous father?

"But tha' soldiers he killed in tha' plaza, and tha' acolytes he sacrificed on tha' tower, those weren'a enemies but allies an as tha' ruler of Hanrahan, I cannot pardon him for slaying my people when they fought by his side," she said firmly.

She could have ranted and railed at him for shooting Jalal while they were in the midst of discussing surrender. She could have lain at his feet all the people who died after he fired that arrow, and blamed him for maiming her best friend in the process. Part of her did.

But in the hours since the battle ended, she remembered her own response to Loman's sneak attack. Her battle cry of 'no mercy' had doomed the lives of many, just as much as Loman's arrow had, and only Heila's miracle of healing had kept the death toll as small as it had been. Her cry might have been a response to his attack, but it was hardly her only option, and so she took a portion of the guilt for those deaths on her own shoulders.

It was his callous act of using her people as fuel for his sorcery, however, that truly left her furious with the young priest, and more so, his willingness to reap the lives of his own soldiers in order to kill a few more of hers. Those were things that he had to be held accountable for, or she couldn't claim to be a just and noble ruler to her people.



"Heila," Sybyll said as she turned to face the Willow Witch. "Ye said he weren't in control of tha' rain of arrows. Were he in control of his sorcery at all t'night? Did he knowingly sacrifice me people ta' fuel his ritual? An' were tha' people he sacrificed willing or were they deceived in ta' offerin' their lives?"

"This is ridiculous!" Head Priest Germot protested. "You don't put a knight or a lord on trial because his soldiers die when they march into battle! Some men have to be sacrificed to hold off the..."

"I can have ye' gagged like me cousin," Sybyll said, interrupting the head priest before he could offer up any excuses for what Loman had done. "Ye'd best hold yer tongue while tha' grownups are speaking. Ye'll have yer turn if it's needed," she snapped.

"I... I don't know," Heila admitted with a heavy sigh. "When I fought the Sorcerers of the Cauldron of Flame, they used a ritual of self-sacrifice to pass their power to another."

After the explosive duel in the arena, she and Ashlynn had spoken at length about the way the sorcerers pooled their power to emulate the strength of a witch. After all, as near as they could tell, the Cauldron of Flame were followers of a long-lost Volcano Witch, and there was a great deal of similarity between their sorcery and witchcraft.

As near as they'd been able to tell, the sorcerers immolated themselves, becoming brief, momentary 'volcanoes' of power as they burned up their own life to create an explosion of power that their leader could guide and use in their own sorcery. It wasn't the same as a witch drawing on the power of nature, but it allowed them to wield more power than an ordinary sorcerer could.

"What Loman's ritual did was different," Heila said as she recalled the terrified face of the acolyte who wanted nothing more than to escape from the wave of death that was consuming them. "Loman's sorcery is derived from the methods of Oracles. It was sorcery designed by a Sovereign of Stars, and once it was put in place, there was no changing it."

"It wasn't sophisticated sorcery, but it was complicated," Heila explained, looking at Hauke and Jalal as she tried to explain what she'd seen. "It was like your frost on the windows," she said as she found a point of comparison. "Your frost does one thing and one thing only. It prevents people from looking through the window. But it can't stop someone from breaking the window, and even though it does its job well, touch one spot with a hot coal from the fire and watch the frost melt away from that spot."

"Or shatter," Hauke said, nodding in understanding. "If sorcery is delicate, like a snowflake, then it will break apart as soon as something disrupts it. If you create something that is large and powerful, but delicate as a snowflake, then when it breaks, it can be very dangerous," he said, frowning at the priest in tattered robes.

"Ancestor Ines always warned me when my designs were too brittle to withstand pressures and Ancestor Erarik made sure I knew how to reinforce my spells," he explained, giving full respect to his teachers despite the way they'd betrayed him at the end. After all, he was still learning and growing from the lessons they'd taught him, and one act of betrayal didn't wipe out a lifetime of debt for the knowledge he'd gained from them.

"Didn't your teachers do the same for you?" Hauke asked, frowning at the battered priest. "Why would you use sorcery that was so dangerous and risky?"

"Our sacred rights aren't like your heathen witchcraft," Loman said, speaking for the first time since Dame Sybyll had sent the townsfolk home to their beds. "We don't presume to design a sacred right by ourselves. Each ritual is a holy gift from the Great Prophet, the Saints, or the Exemplars. They conform to The Lord of Light's holy design."

"You're the ones who are usurping powers that do not belong to you and using them in disorganized, chaotic, and unholy ways," Loman insisted. "You bend the natural order of things to fit your will. We only conform to our Lord's laws, and we follow the path He blazed in the Heavens."

"You want to know what my teacher taught me," Loman said, looking directly into the cold, blue eyes of the demon with the glittering, iridescent horn. "My teacher is Exemplar Domas Onaitis, the Chosen Emissary of the Ascended Archer, Ceslovas Beksa. I would never profane his teachings by deviating from them."

There were many things that Loman was willing to endure while he tried to find a path forward from the tragedy that had unfolded tonight. But hearing a demon question the wisdom of Exemplar Domas's teachings crossed a line he couldn't accept... because beyond doubts about his teacher lay doubts about the sacred designs of the Holy Lord of Light himself, and Loman could never allow his heart to become fertile ground for doubts about the center of his entire faith!

Near the refreshment table where they'd been instructed to stand and observe, Cossot's brow wrinkled in thought before she leaned close enough to her shorter friend to whisper in Roseen's ear.

"Do you understand any of this?" she asked softly. "Snowflakes and brittle magic?"

"Not really," Roseen admitted quietly. "But I think Lady Heila is saying that Lord Loman's prayers weren't very good. She said they were only as strong as frost on the window, and we could scrub that away with a kitchen rag."

"That can't be right though," Cossot murmured, frowning as she tried to follow the conversation. "The Church's miracles come from the Holy Lord of Light himself. Nothing in the world should be more perfect."

"But it sounds like things did go wrong," Roseen said with a complicated expression on her face as she looked at the tattered figure of the man her closest friend once idolized. "After all, people died..."

"I think I understand," Jalal said, forcing himself to remove his hand from where it had been cradling the stump of his arm and pointing at Loman Lothian. "You call the stars you follow 'the Ascended Archer' but we have another name for those same stars. We know them as the First Hunter and many of my people follow his ways," the former Eldritch Lord said.

Sitting next to Heila, Diarmuid's eyes widened in surprise. He was still trying to digest the diminutive witch's revelation that, despite everything he knew, Ignatious had survived the Brother's War and moreover, had become a Vampire like the ones he once studied.

Now, the foundations of his faith trembled beneath his feet as he heard another demon claiming to follow the same ways as the Church. Or, if not the same ways, the same holy figure in the heavens, even if they knew him by a different name.

"When you say that you follow the ways of the 'First Hunter'," Diarmuid asked hesitantly. "What does that mean?"

"The 'First Ones' were the stars that guided us out of the Age of Ice, thousands of years ago," Jalal began. "The whole of the world was covered in ice and snow, save for the warm lands in the south and

pockets of green here and there where life hung on. But when the ice melted away, it was the First Ones who guided us away from disaster."

"The First Hunter teaches us to be patient, because our people depend on the game that we hunt," Jalal explained. "He teaches us to be certain before the spear leaves our hands or the arrow leaves our bow, because once we have thrown it, we cannot change our minds. He teaches us restraint, to thin the herd but not to decimate it, or there will be nothing to hunt the next year."

"We learn many things from the First Ones," Jalal said. "My people have always held close to the ways of the stars, and we would not forget their lessons, or twist them to suit a thirst for power or greed," he said solemnly as he looked at the young priest in his tattered black robes.

"When you shot me," the wounded warrior said directly to the young priest. "It was the shot of a patient hunter who waited until his prey was calm, relaxed, and defenseless. I let down my guard because we called for surrender, but a true hunter would see that as an invitation. I should congratulate you on an excellent hunt," he said before lowering his brows and scowling at all three of the clergymen.

"But when you unleashed a rain of arrows that killed indiscriminately, I saw no hunting in what you did," Jalal said. "And I cannot understand how the power of the First Hunter can be invoked in such a way."

"Isn't it obvious?" Germot muttered under his breath. "It's because your 'First Hunter' is a primitive, heretical icon that only mimics the truth and glory of the Ascended Archer," he said bitterly.

"Germot, enough," Diarmuid said, intervening before Dame Sybyll could take action against the quarrelsome priest. "You aren't an Inquisitor, you don't know what it means to dedicate your life to the search of truth," he said before he turned to look back at Jalal. "What you just shared with me is a truth that no one in the Church has ever heard, or at least, if we have, then it's been locked away in vaults that I've never entered."

What Jalal had just shared with him amounted to little more than folklore, and Ignatious was certain that most of his fellows in the Church would dismiss it as such. It was so primitive that, to Diarmuid's ears, it sounded like the myths and legends that had endured since ancient times, before the coming of the Great Prophet cleansed the lands of the old countries.

A modern scholar would dismiss them as legends, distorted by years of oral tradition that predated writing, and he would pay them little mind. But to Diarmuid, there was always a kernel of truth to be discovered in any story and one of the things he'd just heard reminded him far too much of the origins of his own faith.

"Germot isn't wrong to point out that the Ascended Archer, Ceslovas Beksa, isn't the same as your First Hunter," Diarmuid said slowly, feeling as if he'd looked into the heavens for the first time tonight and seen something greater than ever before. "But you said that the First Ones, that the stars guided you out of a time of hardship, an Age of Ice, and taught you how to thrive..."

"Disciple Loman probably knows the stories of Ceslovas Beksa better than I do," Diarmuid admitted. "But according to scripture, the Great Prophet was followed by thirteen great teachers who ascended to the heavens when they died, preserving their teachings for all time. You say that the stars guided you, and they've guided us as well, haven't they Loman?" the Inquisitor said, turning his gaze on the young priest.

"I can see similarities, if you put it that way, Inquisitor," Loman admitted reluctantly. "The Great Prophet was born into a world at war with itself. The Empire of Eternal Waves fell, man turned against man, beasts haunted the night and all the lands were engulfed by chaos and war. The Great Prophet and his Thirteen Teachers led us back from the brink of madness and brought about a new era of peace and prosperity by purging the land of any who could destroy or divide his chosen people," he said, all but reciting from the oldest scriptures of the life of the Great Prophet.

"But among his Thirteen Teachers, Ceslovas Beksa wasn't a hunter, he was a general," Loman continued. "He did teach patience, just as this 'First Hunter' did, and he also said that you had to be certain that any battle you fought was truly worth fighting for because once the battle was joined, it would be too late to have regrets."

"But Ceslovas Beksa also taught us to pursue our enemy to utter destruction," Loman said firmly. "He made sure that we understood that the foe we allowed to escape could return to us ten times as strong if he was allowed to find friends and allies. That was why it was so important to be patient and attack only when you were certain that you could achieve victory... Because if you allowed your enemy to live, they would only grow stronger."

"And isn't that exactly what's happened here?" Loman asked bitterly. "We've surrendered, and now, a vampire sits upon a throne where a faithful lord once ruled. A whole barony will now grow crops and raise livestock to feed the demon's armies. Losing this battle will make it that much harder to win the war..."

"We're sinners," he said, looking directly at Diarmuid with eyes that were sunken and haunted by visions of battles yet to come. "Not because we failed here, but because we turned away from the struggle before us. We saved a few lives, maybe even a few hundred lives... but how many thousands have we doomed by allowing the demons to have this victory?"

#### Chapter 998: Snapping A Bow (Part One)

Few of the humans present looked comfortable after Loman declared himself and everyone else present sinners for surrendering to save their lives.

Germot looked like he'd swallowed an insect, and that the greatest struggle of his life had arrived in the form of a stomach that wanted to empty itself on the stone floor in front of the powerful vampire.

Roseen's face had gone deathly pale, but inside her chest, something else was welling up and threatening to burst forth, and unlike the sickly looking Head Priest, it wasn't her dinner.

"He thinks we're sinners for not wanting to die?" Roseen hissed, barely able to keep her voice to a whisper as she clenched her fist hard enough for her fingernails to bite into her palms. "For wanting our families to live?"

"He sounds like he believes it," Cossot said, and there was something broken in her voice. "He really, truly believes that we should have all died fighting rather than surrender. He, he probably even thinks that I'm a sinner for helping Dame Sybyll tonight," she realized, half convinced that Loman would have rather seen her die to Dame Sybyll's axe than reveal where Ian and Bastian Hanrahan had gone during the battle.

"That's insane," Roseen hissed, more forcefully than she intended. Several people glanced their way, and she quickly lowered her voice again. "My mother didn't raise me to throw my life away for nothing. Neither did yours."

Cossot nodded slowly, but her eyes remained fixed on Loman's face, watching the zeal burning there along with a good amount of self-loathing. The man she'd once admired, the powerful lord who seemed so certain and strong when he stripped off his lordly tunic to don the robes of his faith, now looked like someone who would gladly lead everyone she loved to their deaths if that very same faith demanded it.

He'd seemed like a savior come to rescue them from the jaws of darkness and evil... but the darkness turned out to be a woman who had been badly wronged by the lords of Lothian March... and if there had been any evil on display tonight, it had come from the man who sat upon a stolen throne.

So what then, was Loman Lothian? Had he ever been a savior? Or had he always been this... this wretched, tattered thing who would see everyone die instead of yielding even one inch of ground?

Liam Dunn and Hugo Hanrahan, on the other hand, frowned deeply as they listened to the men of faith debating doctrine with their Eldritch peers. Both men had come close enough to leaders of the church to see beneath the surface of the church's teachings and to understand that the church served its own interests first, before it ever served the interests of the people.

Yet Loman struck them differently than any of the high church officials they'd encountered in the past. More than either of the young lords, and much more than the aged officials of the Church like Head Priest Germot, Loman truly believed...

The revelations that the Eldritch shared some traditions with the Church did little to shake either man, but seeing the zeal burning in Loman's eyes, and even a bit of self-hatred, shook both men to their cores. After all, if Loman represented the true will of the Church, and the Church would follow the dictates of the Ascended Archer, Ceslovas Beksa, to pursue their enemies until they were utterly destroyed... then there would be no hope for peace once Lady Ashlynn concluded her war. The Church would never let them rest!

"I understand ye have a good deal ta' discuss," Sybyll said, interrupting the scholars and stepping into the silence created by Loman's condemnation of surrender. "Yer welcome ta' continue yer conversation fer as long as ye wish after we conclude our business," she said, calling their attention back to her original question.

"Dawn waits fer no woman, an' I need an answer soon," Sybyll said firmly. "Is there any reason I shouldn'a judge Loman Lothian a murderer fer sacrificing my people ta' fuel his sorcery?"

Sybyll's question brought everything back into sharp focus. As interesting as it was to hear the similarities between the traditions Jalal's people had meticulously preserved since the end of the Age of Ice and the early days of the Church, there was a pressing question that demanded an answer.

"I'm sorry, old friend," Jalal said as he looked at the tattered and ragged priest. "I wanted to understand if the power and traditions he invoked were the same as ours or different. Not because I'm curious, but because aligning ourselves with the stars aligns our bodies, our minds, and our hearts with the guidance from above."

"Young Hugo," Jalal said, flashing a slight smile at the young man he'd lent a blade to at the start of the battle. "How did you feel after using the ritual I taught you tonight?"

"Sharper," Hugo said after thinking for a moment. "I, I'm not meant to wield a sword or charge into battle with a lance," he admitted. "No matter how much Sir Rain and Lord Owain beat me in the name of 'teaching', I was never going to be a real knight, no matter what title my father gave me."

"But the ritual you taught me," he said, placing a hand over his heart. "It helped me cut through my fears and doubts. The blade in my hand felt more comfortable than any sword ever did. I was... ready to face what was ahead, even if I was still frightened of it."

"That's part of what it means to be a warrior," Jalal said, using his only remaining hand to clap the young human lord on the shoulder. In an odd way, he realized, he'd become some kind of kin to the human when Sybyll gave him the surname 'Hanrahan', and somehow, he felt even closer to Hugo than he had at the start of the evening... as though he were a young kitten in need of guidance.

"Sybyll," Jalal continued, as he finally arrived at the answer he'd been looking for when he asked about the teachings of the 'Ascended Archer.' "When Stargazers in my clan invoke the First Hunter, they gain a determination to finish their hunt, to complete what they've started because people depend on their success. Their world narrows, distractions fall away, and they become better hunters in a number of ways."

"I have not seen the ritual that this priest used, but once he set his arrow to the string, he may have lost his ability to change his mind," he said. "From the way he speaks, I do not believe that the person who taught him this ritual gave him the freedom to set his own conditions or limit the scope of his hunt. In a way, he is both the archer taking aim at me, and the arrow in his teacher's bow."

"You're suggesting that what Loman did was an extension of Exemplar Domas's will?" Diarmuid said, horrified by the implications of that statement if it were true. "That the rituals he used were... were homicidal traps that would consume the lives of the people who supported his own disciple?"



"No, it wasn't like that at all!" Loman insisted, trembling in fury as the conniving demon sought to move the blame from his own shoulders onto his teachers. "Exemplar Domas warned me that the rituals he taught me could claim the lives of men with weaker faith. He told me that if I ever needed to fill my quiver with arrows, I should choose the strongest, most devout men available."

"Those were the men whom Head Priest Germot sent me," he said as he looked at the head priest with a ripple of doubt suddenly sending his heart beating faster and turning his palms slick. "Those were the most devout men of your temple, weren't they? You chose them all personally?"

"I, I told my acolytes that a Disciple of Exemplar Domas needed our most faithful men at his side to repel the demons," Germot said, awkwardly wringing his hands. "The ones I sent were the ones who volunteered. But if I'd wanted to, I could have sent twice as many men," he added quickly. "No one would have turned away from your request, your Worship."

"But, you chose among those volunteers for the strongest and most devout, didn't you?" Loman repeated as his stomach plummeted. He didn't need to hear an answer from the Head Priest to know that he hadn't... Just looking in the other man's eyes told him everything he needed to know.

Head Priest Germot had sent him a dozen men who volunteered, but beyond that... if Loman was lucky, the decision had been random. But watching as the Head Priest squirmed against the chains that bound him and struggled to provide an answer, Loman suspected that the men he sent were the ones he would have been happiest to be rid of should Loman have taken them into his service after the battle...

Some of them may have had strong faith, but none of them were people Germot would have minded losing from his temple.

#### Chapter 999: Snapping A Bow (Part Two)

"It wouldn't have mattered, even if they were men who believed strongly enough to walk across a bed of coals, or generous enough to give all of their worldly wealth to the Church," Heila said, shaking her head at the clergymen from the Church.

"Your miracles aren't miracles," Heila said flatly. "You aren't 'conduits for the will of the Holy Lord of Light to flow through,'" she said, repeating an explanation that Ignatious had given her for how the Church was able to harness the power of sorcery without understanding it. "Your prayers and rituals are simple sorcery. The power you use has always come from your own bodies."

"Blasphemy!" Germot said, rising to his feet and pointing at Heila with trembling hands that could barely support the weight of the chains that bound him. "Complete and utter- OOF!"

Sybyll moved faster than anyone's eyes could follow, and she struck out viciously with a fist to the middle-aged priest's belly, driving the air from his lungs and doubling him over in pain.

-CRASH!-

The force of Sybyll's blow was so great that it sent the Head Priest sailing through the air until he crashed into the table of refreshments, sending pitchers of wine and ale along with rows of neatly organized goblets clattering to the ground and soaking the priest's robes in a torrent of alcohol.

Cossot and Roseen both gave startled cries, rushing out of the way of the flying priest and narrowly avoiding getting doused by the same flood of alcohol. For a moment, both women looked at each other, as if to make sure they were both fine, and then over at the collapsed priest, lying among the scattered goblets and the broken bits of table.

"I, I'll fetch something to clean this up," Cossot said quickly, once she was certain that Roseen was fine. Before she could take more than two steps, however, Dame Sybyll's voice froze her in her tracks.

"Leave him like that, Cossot," Sybyll said with an edge to her voice that commanded instant obedience, though she followed her words with a glance that was a bit more gentle and a gesture for the two women to move to the other side of the dais, away from the crumpled priest.

"I told ye ta' mind yer tongue, Germot," Sybyll said sharply, without giving any respect to the man's title. "Once more an' I'll tear it out," she said before the air around her seemed to shimmer as she vanished, reappearing in her seat atop the gilded throne. "Go on, Heila," she said, smiling sweetly and revealing her fangs to everyone else who was bound in chains. "There won'a be another interruption."

"R-right," Heila said as she fought down the reflex to rush over to the Head Priest's side and check on his wounds. Already, she could see a rivulet of blood trickling down Germot's scalp from where he'd hit his head. He looked dazed and disoriented as he lay in a growing puddle of ale and wine, but if she did that, then Germot would have succeeded in dragging things out even further. Part of her wondered if the

priest was doing it deliberately after Sybyll's comment about there only being a few hours left before sunrise.

So, even though it made her uncomfortable to leave the man lying there, bleeding and barely conscious, she did as Dame Sybyll asked and returned to the discussion about Loman's sorcery.

"What I'm saying," Heila said as she turned back to Loman's ragged figure. "Is that the priests of the Church believe that they are harvesting the 'faith' of their followers. In reality, they're draining away their lives. Just like all sorcery, if the amounts are small, then no one suffers for it, but what Loman did tonight killed two men the instant he fired his first arrow."

"His rain of arrows was even more devious," she continued. "Whoever developed the ritual, whether it was this Exemplar Domas, the current Sovereign of the Stars, or one of their predecessors who handed it down to future generations, they understood its lethality to the person who dared to use it," Heila said in a voice that dripped with condemnation.

"What, what do you mean, Lady Heila?" Diarmuid asked. He felt like many of the things he'd believed all of his life were suddenly uncertain, as if he'd only known a portion of the truth and believed blindly that he understood much more of it than he thought.

He'd always known the Church kept secrets from the faithful... some knowledge was dangerous after all. But the things the witch was saying would be considered High Heresy by the Church if they were lies. And if they were true, then he had no idea what to call them.

"Inquisitor Diarmuid," Heila said flatly as she looked at the dark-haired man whom she'd come to respect as a genuine seeker of truth. "The reason that the arrows struck indiscriminately when they fell in the plaza is because Lord Loman was no longer connected to the sorcery once he completed the ritual."

"If he had been," she explained. "It would have siphoned his life away as well. Instead, once he 'loosed his arrow', the ritual fed off the acolytes who powered it, and it would have consumed every last one of their lives before it came to an end."

"So, whether or not Lord Loman was aware of what his sorcery would do, the person who designed the ritual most certainly was," she declared. "So, in a way, I agree with Lord Jalal. Loman was an arrow, fired

from Exemplar Domas's bow. If there's an argument to be made that he isn't a murderer, it's that his teacher gave him sorcery that he didn't understand, intending for a tragedy like this to unfold."

"No!" Loman insisted. "No, Exemplar Domas would never do that! If there's someone to blame, if anyone is at fault, it's me for... for having lost my way," he said as he sank to his knees. "I'm lost," he sobbed as everything seemed to crash down on him at once. "So very lost... and I don't know if the stars can guide me home again."

He didn't know when it had started. Things had seemed so simple when he followed Exemplar Domas, learning everything the man had to teach and hoping one day that his vision would extend as far beyond the horizon as his teacher's had.

He thought that he had found his true calling when his brother, Owain, murdered Ashlynn Blackwell on the night of their wedding. He thought that he'd been sent back to Lothian March to expose the truth, to reveal his brother's crime, and to take his brother's place as the next Marquis.

Then, after struggling for months to become the sort of man his father and the people of Lothian would accept as their ruler, he thought he had realized the error of his ways. He donned the black and silver robes of a Disciple once again and stood against the demons to protect the people of Hanrahan and the entire march from the army of the Crimson Knight.

He'd been so certain as he stood atop the tower and drew his Bow of Stars against the Demon Lord of Airgead Mountain... He'd been ready to strike the blow that would purge a threat from the lands that his brother and his father before him had never managed to kill. He was certain when he let that arrow fly that he had found his purpose in life.

And now, all of it lay in ruins. Acolytes had died so he could loose that arrow, and it had only taken an arm from his enemy. More men had died for him to unleash a Rain of Judgment, a storm of arrows that was supposed to fall with the Holy Lord of Light's own judgment, killing foes and culling the faithless from their own ranks at the same time...

But now, even Inquisitor Diarmuid looked at him like a man who had gone astray. A vampire sat upon the gilded throne of one of his father's vassals, and she judged him a murderer... and he couldn't even bring himself to say that she was wrong.

## Chapter 1000: Snapping A Bow (Part Three)

"I almost feel sorry for him," Roseen said as she looked at Loman's broken, sobbing figure, kneeling on the cold stone floor of the great hall.

"Don't," Cossot said, and there was a hint of steel in her voice that Roseen had never heard before. "He killed at least seven men tonight, and you heard what Lady Heila said. He didn't risk his own life to fight Dame Sybyll's army; he just sacrificed the poor men that Head Priest Germot sent him," she said, wondering if those poor acolytes had even known what it was they were volunteering for when Loman demanded a dozen 'arrows for his quiver.'

"And the whole time," Cossot said as the look in her eyes grew colder. "He acted like he was our savior. In a way, that's even worse than what Ian Hanrahan did."

"How is it worse?" Roseen asked, genuinely curious at how her friend had come to the conclusion that Loman was worse than a man who had spent his entire reign stealing from both his subjects and his liege lord while deflowering any pretty woman who caught his eye and fathering nearly half a dozen children in the process.

"Because Baron Hanrahan knew that what he was doing was wrong, he just thought he was getting away with it," Cossot explained, her eyes never leaving Loman's broken figure. "He knew he was stealing and hurting people, and he did it anyway because he was that twisted and wicked. He wouldn't have tried so hard to hide his deeds if he thought there was nothing wrong with them," she pointed out.

"But Lord Loman thought he was doing the right thing," Cossot said with a heavy sigh. "He thought the Holy Lord of Light wanted him to sacrifice those men. I, I don't think that's right. The Holy Lord of Light is supposed to want us to struggle to do our best in this life. To rise up to the challenges we're given. But Lord Loman, he didn't just push those men down; he all but threw them off the tower, just so he could chase his own victory. I, I don't think it's supposed to be that way."

"But if Loman was just using the, um, the sorcery that Exemplar Domas gave him," Roseen finished slowly, "then it isn't just Lord Loman who's like that. And if an Exemplar is like that..."

"Then is the Church any different from Lords like Ian Hanrahan?" Cosset asked rhetorically. "Maybe, maybe we're no different to them than crops in the field, just waiting to be sacrificed to fuel their prayers, or, whatever. I don't know," she said as she turned her gaze to Dame Sybyll. "All I know is, I'm glad to finally hear the truth..."

While the two women leaning against the wall exchanged whispers, the members of Sybyll's court looked at the collapsed Lothian Lord with looks that varied from pity to contempt and even outright disgust.

Liam Dunn was, perhaps, the most disgusted with the fallen priest. He had commanded men in battle more than once, and he'd sent men to their near-certain deaths on two occasions that he could remember. Those men died as heroes, and when Liam returned from those battles, he visited their families personally and saw that they had enough money to live on for at least the next ten years to come, not as compensation for their loss, but as thanks for the sacrifice those soldiers made to save their companions.

But here Loman knelt, battered, broken, and sobbing after sacrificing his own men. He had made no moves the entire night to honor that sacrifice; he'd even indirectly castigated Head Priest Germot for sending him men of 'weak faith', whatever that meant. It was as if he couldn't accept responsibility for what he had done as their commander, because somehow, it was all the arrangement of the Church, and the whole thing left a taste in Liam's mouth like ashes.

Lord Jalal had lost an arm, and he wasn't crying over it. Dame Sybyll and Lady Heila must have lost friends in the clash with defenders, but neither of them was sobbing over it. Even Hugo, the man who Liam had once thought didn't possess a brave bone in his body, had spent the night rushing about trying to stop his people from fighting the Eldritch because he knew even more of his people would die if violence broke out.

No, Liam realized. He'd thought that the Eldritch were weak and cowardly because he'd only ever fought villages full of farmers and woodsmen with barely any real soldiers among them. He'd thought that he fought on the side of the Holy Lord of Light's chosen people who were destined to achieve victory, and that he would ride that cresting wave to greater heights himself.

It was only now, after seeing Ian Hanrahan and Loman Lothian stripped bare and broken before him, that he realized he'd never even seen true strength. But he'd seen it now, and besides the disgust he felt at seeing Loman's broken, sobbing figure, a part of him had begun to wonder if he would really have done any better... or if he could one day learn to be as strong as people like the Eldritch people around him.

"Exemplar Domas wasn't wrong," Loman repeated as he fought back the sobs, clutching to the only thing he had left... his faith in his teacher and the ways of the Holy Lord of Light. It was impossible for

the divine emissaries of Light to be wrong, so if a crime had been committed and a great wrong had been done, then Loman felt that he alone must bear the blame for it.

"His Holiness can't be responsible for what I've done," Loman said more firmly as he straightened his back. "So if a crime was committed, then I am the one who is guilty of it. I won't let you put the blame on him."

Perhaps he was lost. And maybe, because he was lost, he'd done something terrible, possibly even something unforgivable. But if he had done wrong, he knew that it was his error, just like it had been an error for men of weak faith to step forward to serve as arrows in his quiver, or for Head Priest Germot to send him those men.

There had been many, many mistakes made today, but those mistakes belonged to the people who were here, and Loman wouldn't foist the blame for it on his teacher in the Holy City. On this, at least, he would take a stand.