

The Vampire 1001

Chapter 1001: Snapping A Bow (Part Four)

"I think yer wrong, Loman," Sybyll said as she stood, walking to stand over the broken, kneeling priest. "I think ye've been played like a piece on the chess board this whole time, and ye've not once been a master of yer own fate."

"I think that's why yer so lost," she said with a brief glance at Heila. "Maybe my brother can sort ye out. Lady Heila didn'a lie. Ignatious crawled out of a deeper darkness and more anguish than even I suffered an' still, he holds to his faith. There must be somethin' of value there to guide him all tha' way back from tha brink."

"But yer dangerous, Loman," she continued sternly. "Yer dangerous an' yer not in control of yerself or yer sorcery an I cannot allow ye to threaten my people again any more than I can forgive ye fer what ye've already done ta' them."

"I understand," Loman said, holding his head up high and meeting Sybyll's gaze directly. "You may be a demon, but you're a knight, aren't you? You must uphold justice, no matter who has done wrong. I will not plead for mercy."

"Heila," Sybyll said, looking over her shoulder at the diminutive witch. "I promised Her Dominion that I wouldn'a kill him, but I must punish him fer what he's done. Is yer witchcraft strong enough ta' preserve his life from a heavy wound?"

"I can," Heila said hesitantly as she approached the crimson-haired vampire and the ragged priest. "If it's pain you're after," she said, dropping a hand to her whip. "I can give him however many lashes you want..."

"It's kind of ye ta' offer, Lady Heila," Sybyll interrupted. "But Loman were right about somethin'. Stand up, Loman Lothian," she said firmly. "An' receive the judgement fer yer crimes."

Chains clanked and rattled as Loman stood, slowly drawing himself to his full height before Dame Sybyll. He was still shorter than the powerful vampire, and this close, he felt a palpable aura of bloodlust radiating from her as she stopped holding herself back. For a moment, she was perfectly still and inhumanly strong, and it was a struggle for Loman to simply draw breath in her presence.

A dark, predatory smile appeared on the vampire's crimson lips as she reached out to the chains that bound Loman's hands together and the sound of tearing metal filled the air as she pulled the links of the chain apart, holding on to his left hand while she looked him directly in the eyes.

"Ye were right tha' its dangerous ta' leave an enemy behind who can still harm ye," she said. "But unless everything I've learned from Jalal over the years is wrong, yer sorcery, yer 'holy rituals' still require ye to do the work of an archer. Ye still have ta' draw an arrow wit' yer Bow of Stars, an ye still have ta see yer target ta aim at them."

"Am I wrong, Lord Loman?" Sybyll asked in a tone much closer to what a lover would use to arouse their partner than the tone a lord would use to question the guilty, yet somehow, when the words spilled from the crimson lips of the alluring vampire, they sounded even more chilling.

"You aren't wrong," Loman said, holding up two fingers on his right hand. "I've heard that in the old countries, they punish archers by severing two fingers on the right hand to stop them from ever drawing a bow again..."

He wasn't certain if it was true or not. It sounded outlandish to punish a man who relied on his ability to shoot a bow to feed his family or defend his home by cutting off his only means to do either, but Loman had to remind himself when he heard the story that the old countries still warred upon each other. If you were afraid of your defeated foe coming back to face you again one day, severing the ability of an archer to take down an armored knight was certainly an efficient way to weaken your foe without resorting to slaughter.

"Ye killed seven men ta' fuel yer sorcery t'night, Loman," Sybyll said sharply. "Only a corrupt and coddled lord would think that offering up two fingers is a fair price for the lives of seven men! An' how many more died in tha' plaza who were yer own brothers in faith an' in arms? Am I supposed ta' tell them tha' their lives, an the pain an' sufferin' of all tha' wounded only amounts ta takin' two fingers from a lord's hand?"

"Lady Heila," Sybyll said, pausing to look at the diminutive witch. "Ye said tha' acolytes who survived had lost many years of their lives ta' this sorcery. How many years did they lose?"

"It, it doesn't quite work like that," Heila said hesitantly as she felt the fury radiating off of Sybyll in response to Loman's offer of two fingers. "All of them are withered and frail. If they receive good care,

plenty of rest and don't need to do strenuous work, they may enjoy another five, even ten years of life. But if they try to return to the lives they lived before, they wouldn't last a full year of labor."

"Seven men dead as sacrifices," Sybyll said. "Five reduced ta' invalids wit' only a handful of years ta' live. Ye know, I'm tempted ta' offer them ta' Tausau, ta' join 'is Mongrel Horde, just ta' give them a chance at living full lives again after what ye did ta them. Maybe then they can claim some justice wit' their own hands if they can ever hunt ye down..."

"But fer now," she said as she gave him a menacing look. "I'll make sure ye can never draw yer Bow of Stars again, nor take aim at any of me people!"

When she struck, Dame Sybyll's movements were brutal, decisive, and faster than anyone could see. They were also precisely calculated to cripple the man before her without claiming his life, but she wanted to make certain that he suffered a fitting punishment.

Dame Sybyll understood archers well enough to know that they aimed with one eye more than the other, and that it was usually the opposite eye from the hand they used to draw back the bow, and so when she struck, her first swipe raked her razor sharp, elongated fingernails down the length of the left side of his face, leaving several deep, bloody wounds and slicing his eye open in the process.

Pain erupted in Loman's head and his face felt like it had been dragged across a bed of hot coals, but Sybyll wasn't done breaking the archer yet. Loman had offered two fingers, but that was far from enough to pay for the crimes he'd committed against her people tonight. So, once her hand had torn through the soft, tender flesh of his handsome features, it swept lower, clutching at his left arm and ripping it from its socket.

He had taken Jalal's left arm from him and left the proud warrior weakened, able to carry only a single blade into a dance with death. Now, Sybyll smiled at the symmetry as she inflicted the very same wound on Loman Lothian. His right arm, she left him. He'd offered up the fingers of that hand and she wanted him to keep those fingers as a reminder that she'd rejected his pathetic offer that made a mockery of justice.

Instead, she took the arm that just hours ago had held aloft a glittering Bow of Stars, leaving nothing in its place but torn flesh and broken bone...

Chapter 1002: Teacher Sybyll

"AAAAAAAAGGGGGGHHHHHH!!!!"

Loman's anguished cry echoed off the walls of the great hall, followed by a sickening, meaty -SPLAT- as Sybyll dropped his severed arm unceremoniously on the floor.

"Sybyll!" Heila shouted, dashing forward with a horrified look on her face as she realized what the Crimson Knight had meant by inflicting a 'heavy wound' on Loman Lothian. "I can't," she started to say, only to snap her mouth shut when she realized that Sybyll already knew what she would have said.

Of course, Sybyll intended to inflict a wound that not even Heila could fully heal. A lost eye and severed arm would be gone forever. Sybyll knew that because Heila had told her that restoring Jalal's arm was out of reach, and was likely out of reach even for Lady Ashlynn by the time they could return to the Vale of Mists.

At the same time, she'd said that there was nothing she could do for Sir Tommin's eyes, but perhaps Lady Ashlynn could restore his sight since it looked like he'd only been blinded by intense light rather than having his eyes ruptured entirely.

"You knew," Heila said as her hands worked furiously, sorting through the bottles in the pouches at her waist until she found the ones that would stop the bleeding and prevent Loman from losing his life tonight. "You knew exactly how far you could wound him," she said, blinking back the moisture that gathered in her eyes so she could focus on her healing.

She had to remind herself that somewhere, she'd known how brutal Dame Sybyll would be as well. It was why she'd offered to use her whip on Loman rather than allowing Sybyll to mete out punishment with her own hands. She could have inflicted enough pain to be punishment without leaving him so... so completely destroyed. He would have recovered more easily from the wounds she inflicted. But then, it wouldn't have had the same effect as what Sybyll had chosen to do.

"Cossot, Roseen, come here," Sybyll called, ignoring Heila's confusion and summoning the two young women who had stood to the side as observers ever since the townsfolk went home. "That is, if Roseen can," Sybyll added when she realized that the shorter woman had fainted dead away at the sight of Loman's severed limb.

Roseen wasn't the only person struggling with the sight. Germot seemed to have recovered enough from being thrown bodily against the wall to bear witness to the gruesome spectacle of blood spurting from the wound, soaking Heila's skirts as she rushed to save the young lord's life. If the rapidly expanding puddle beneath him was any indication, he likely wished he could faint the way Roseen had.

Liam Dunn had turned away from the spectacle, leaving his chair and walking toward the two young ladies by the wall while muttering that he had smelling salts.

At the beginning of the night, he'd been worried that Dame Sybyll would be injured in her battle against Sir Tommin, or that she might even lose her life in the struggle against the combined forces of the Church. He'd even entertained the fantasy that he could shrink the distance between them if she needed someone to 'make an offering' of blood in order to heal.

Now, however, he swallowed the lump in his throat and thanked the merciful Lord of Light that he'd never offended the Crimson Knight. He'd been so dazzled by her perfect proportions and enchanting visage that he'd forgotten the title bestowed on her reflected the amount of blood that had splattered on her armor over the long years that she'd fought against the Lothians and any of their vassals who dared to attack Airgead Mountain.

"What... what happened?" Roseen asked, blinking several times in confusion after Liam waved a small bottle of smelling salts under her nose. "I thought, for a moment, Lord Loman screamed in pain..."

"He did," Cossot said, taking deep, steadying breaths and trying not to recall the sound of splintering bone and tearing flesh that had preceded Loman's scream. "Dame Sybyll, she, she punished him. For his crimes," she said haltingly as she supported herself on the wall before reaching out a hand to help her friend stand.

"And now she wants to see us. Both of us," she said hesitantly, glancing at where the crimson-haired vampire stood in the puddle of blood that had formed at her feet.

"A-are you going?" Roseen asked, staring at her friend in shock.

"She called for me, so I'm going," Cossot said, though she hardly sounded confident in her words. "Come with me, she wants us both," she said, waving her hand in front of Roseen's face until the other woman took it and climbed to her feet.

"I heard yer conversation wit' Lady Heila earlier," Sybyll said when the pair of women finally reached her side. Both of them made certain to keep their eyes fixed firmly on the vampire and did their best to pretend that nothing was happening on the floor a few feet away from them, but the sounds of Heila tearing Loman's robes into long strips to use as a bandage made it difficult to maintain the illusion that he wasn't there.

"She's right that I've been testing ye t'night," Sybyll said, looking from the shaky Cossot to the faint-looking Roseen and back again. "An' this is a test fer ye now. Take a good long look at him an' tell me why I've done what I've done."

Loman's severed arm was the first thing either woman noticed. For a moment, Cossot had the strange feeling that she was looking at a chicken leg that had been pulled free of the bird, with a smooth, almost polished-looking round knob of bone protruding from bloody, torn flesh. It wasn't until she looked closer that she realized the upper part of Loman's arm had been crushed by Dame Sybyll's powerful fingers, snapping the bone even as she tore the arm from its socket.

Her eyes flickered away from the arm and to the man himself, but the instant she looked at him, her knees grew weak, and without a steadying hand from Dame Sybyll, she would have collapsed to the ground.

The right half of Loman's face was still beautiful. He was a handsome man, and his features blended just the right level of masculine sharpness with a gentleness and youth that had yet to melt away. It was a face that Cossot had dreamed of many times since she first met the young Lothian Lord.

Now, however, the left half of his face was a tattered ruin. His neatly shaped brow hung in tatters over an eye that leaked a thick, glistening fluid. His elegantly arched cheekbone looked like it had broken under the force of Sybyll's sudden attack, and the long, bloody wounds across his face reached all the way to the sweep of his jaw, pulling at his soft lips and leaving them feeling somehow misshapen.

The vampire's blow had been too fast for human eyes to follow, but the carnage it left behind was as comprehensive as it was gruesome. Lady Heila was sprinkling a series of powders across the wounds, and while neither woman could hear everything that she was muttering under her breath as she worked, they both clearly heard the phrase 'no way to prevent the scars from this' and 'he'll be lucky if the muscles in his face still work.'

"So?" Sybyll prompted the young ladies. "Why did I wound him like this?"

"Is, isn't it just what you said?" Roseen asked, turning away from the hideous sight of Loman's wounds to look at Dame Sybyll. "To stop him from drawing or aiming a bow ever again. You, you didn't want him to be a danger to anyone ever again."

"Rosey," Cossot said, clutching her friend's arm and forcing herself to look away from the broken man who no longer remotely resembled the man from her dreams. "It's more than that. Dame Sybyll is too strong, and she's too fast. If she wanted to pluck out Lord Loman's eye and crush it in her hand... she, she could have," Cossot realized as she looked at Sybyll with dawning comprehension.

"You wanted to leave him scarred and hideous," she said as something inside her mind clicked into place, and for a moment, she felt like she had grasped onto an important lesson. "You took away the things that made him dangerous. His eye to aim, his arm to support the bow... and his beauty. He was so handsome and charming that people would want to be near him," she said.

When she said it, she was thinking of herself and how readily she had been willing to volunteer to work with the sick and the wounded, just because he asked her to. And later on, how willing everyone had been to follow him after he stripped off his lordly tunic and revealed his sculpted, athletic physique before donning his priestly robes. He was handsome and...

"Because he was so handsome, people admired him, and when people admired him, they did as he asked," Cossot said in a small voice. "They wanted to do as he asked. So, if he asked for more people to be 'arrows in his quiver', they probably would. Because he was the kind of man that people want to please, because... because if you can please him by doing what he asks, then he might pay attention to you," she said in a voice that was very, very quiet.

"Smart girl," Sybyll said with a smile as she listened to Cossot working out the lesson. "There's more ta it than that, but yer close enough ta' pass this test. But tha' night isn't over," she said as she turned to look at the bound and gagged figure of Ian Hanrahan who had gone as white as a sheet watching Sybyll dismember Loman Lothian.

"I've had me appetizer, Cousin Ian," Sybyll said with a cruel, predatory smile that revealed the full length of her fangs. "It's yer turn ta' reap tha' reward of all the wickedness ye've sown..."

Chapter 1003: Asking Questions

Now that Loman Lothian had been dealt with, Sybyll wasted little time in collecting Ian Hanrahan and his son. Both men had watched in silent horror as Sybyll's court sat in judgment of the influential Lothian Lord. The sight of her brutally disfiguring him and tearing his arm from his body replayed in their minds over and over again as she bodily dragged Ian Hanrahan down multiple flights of stone steps in what had once been his own keep until she reached the narrow row of cells that comprised the castle's dungeon.

Torches burned brightly in the damp, cramped space, but they did little to repel the chill in the air, as if no amount of fire could ever bring real warmth to such a dreadful place. Still, the soldiers of the Second Army knew their craft, and they'd made careful preparations at Sybyll's orders while she dealt with Loman Lothian, and now, Sybyll had everything she needed to conclude her 'reunion' with her cousin, Ian.

"Cossot," Sybyll said, startling the young woman who was seeing the cramped, stone-walled cells of a dungeon for the first time in her life. "I have many questions fer me cousin," she said as she hurled Ian bodily into one of the cells. "Ye can read an' write, can't ye?"

"Of-of course I can," Cossot said, immediately grasping what Dame Sybyll wanted when she spotted a pair of scholar's lap desks sitting to one side, along with small wooden chairs. "You want me to write out his answers to your questions?"

"Exactly," Sybyll said with a predatory grin. "But first, we need ta' settle this one," she said as she took hold of Bastian's tunic and dragged him into the cell across the narrow aisle from the one where she'd dumped Ian. "Listen closely, little cousin," Sybyll purred as she tore away the iron shackles binding his wrists before securing him to the chains that hung from the dungeon wall.

"Yer going ta' do as ye promised, an' list out all of yer father's crimes fer Roseen ta' write down," she said, gesturing to the other young woman. "I'll be checkin' in, from time ta' time, ta' ask yer miserable excuse fer a father about tha' things ye list out. If I find yer lyin', tryin' ta pass tha blame fer yer own wrongs on ta' him, or inventin' stories... Yer a smart enough lad ta' know what will happen ta' ye, aren't ye?"

"Y-yes, c-cousin," Bastian stammered, pressing himself up against the dungeon wall as hard as he could to get even an extra inch or two of distance away from his blood-splattered cousin. He'd already made up his mind when she questioned him in the snow outside of town that he would tell her anything she asked.

He'd used every one of his father's shameful secrets that he could think of as a desperate offering to stave off the kind of fate that awaited his father and thus far, it seemed to be working. But now that he was here, bound in iron in his family's dungeons, he couldn't help but ask the greatest question on his mind.

"And, a-after that? I can go free?" the young lord asked.

"Free is relative, cousin," Sybyll said as she watched Roseen setting up the small writing desk in the cramped cell. "Ye can'a live in Hanrahan ever again. I've no desire ta' see yer face here an' even less desire ta' let ye stir up trouble in me home. But how ye live in exile depends on how well ye cooperate wit' little Roseen here. I could throw ye in a cell in tha' Vale of Mists where ye'd never see tha' light of day again," she offered sweetly.

"Or, I could find a nice village wit' tha' Horned Clan an' give ye a hut an' a plot of land ta live out yer days on," she continued, stepping close to the young lord and tracing a finger along the stubble-covered line of his jaw. "Or perhaps somethin' even better," she added. "Prove yer worth, little cousin, an' I won'a do ye wrong."

"Roseen," Sybyll said, startling the young woman with the suddenness of her movements as she appeared by her side in the blink of an eye, leaning in close enough to whisper into her ear. "This is part of yer test t'night," she said.

"Cossot won'a fail me. I see steel in her," the vampire whispered in Roseen's ear. "If ye want ta' stay by her side, ye'd best do well here. If he lies ta ye, if ye even suspect he's bein' less than honest, just cry out fer me ta' set him straight an' I'll come right over," she promised with a smile that revealed the full length of her sharp, gleaming fangs. "Do ye understand?"

"I do," Roseen said firmly, clutching to the smooth, polished wood of the writing desk and biting her lip when she looked over her shoulder at Cossot who was making similar preparations in the cell across the way. "I won't fail you," she promised.

"Ye can fail me," Sybyll said with a light, musical laugh. "Just don'a fail yerself or Cossot. I'm already giving ye a chance t'night because of her. I'd hate ta' see ye waste it."

Before Roseen could think of how she should respond to the vampire's strange statement, Sybyll was gone, standing in the cell that contained Ian Hanrahan's trembling figure along with Cossot, who had pressed herself into a corner of the cramped cell in order to give Dame Sybyll as much room as she could.

"Now, Ian, it's yer turn," Sybyll said as she hauled the portly man to his feet and tore the gag from his mouth. "Do ye have any last words b'fore we begin?"

"What would be the point?" Ian spat as he raised his shackled hands to massage his jaw. "You're going to kill me no matter what. Just get it over with. I'm sure my 'loyal' sons can tell you everything you want to know. You don't need to bother with me."

"Oh, it's no bother," Sybyll said as she lashed out with one foot, stomping with her heel on the top of Ian's right foot hard enough to shatter bone with a sickening, grinding -CRUNCH- that was unnaturally loud in the small, confined space of the dungeon cell.

"Aaarrggghhhhh!" Ian groaned as his face went instantly pale, with sweat beading on his brow. Were it not for Sybyll roughly grabbing hold of his tunic, he would have dropped to the ground in agony as she twisted her foot on top of his, grinding shards of bone into his flesh.

"Me mother had ta' flee from this very keep wit' a broken leg ta' escape yer father," Sybyll hissed as she leaned close enough to the sweating man's face that only a few strands of hair separated her lips from his ear. "I'll give ye a chance ta' run from me. All ye have ta do is make it ta' tha' first step of tha' stairs, an I'll put an end ta' this. Ye can have a nice, quick death," she promised.

"Or, ye can tell me tha' names of all the women ye wronged," she said as she stepped back away from him, dropping him onto the hard stone floor and taking her foot off of his, giving him plenty of space to run for the door if he wished to. "I figure tha' first one must'a been b'fore we even met," she said with a voice that dripped with scorn. "So why don't ye tell me, what was her name? And what did ye do ta' hide away yer crime of forcin' yerself on her?"

Chapter 1004: Two Scribes

At first, Cossot thought she was fortunate. All Dame Sybyll asked of her was that she sat in the cell and wrote down Ian Hanrahan's confession. She didn't even have to watch what was happening before her. She could just focus on the sheet of parchment, the well of ink, and the quill pen in her hand.

She'd helped her father take notes while he worked on numerous occasions when she was still learning her letters. A whitesmith had to have skilled, steady hands as he poured molten tin, or worked carefully with his snips to refine initial castings. Rather than take his hands away from the work, he had told a much younger Cossot that he needed her to write down a list of molds that he used, the number of castings that failed, and all manner of other details.

It was only later that she realized he'd been doing it as a way of helping her practice what she'd learned from the expensive tutor that he and a few other wealthy merchants had hired to teach their children in a small, private class. He wanted to make sure that she could keep up with the other children, especially her closest friend Roseen, and so he made sure there was still work to be done after her lessons ended, just so she could 'help him out' in the shop.

The small chair that Cossot occupied in the corner of the cell, along with the scholar's lapdesk, couldn't be more familiar to her, but once Ian Hanrahan started speaking, the task became several times more difficult than she thought it would be.

The litany of women's names was bad enough. Dame Sybyll had been right that Ian had started long ago, so long ago, in fact, that it had been Baron Aiden who helped conceal matters the first time his son had pressed matters too far with a woman who intended to remain chaste until her parents arranged a match for her.

At first, Ian seemed to latch on to the idea that he could stay alive longer as long as he could keep talking, so he launched into lurid details about his sordid conquests. The things he boasted about were so vile that Cossot nearly snapped her quill pen just listening to them.

"Talk faster, cousin," Sybyll encouraged, grasping his left arm and drawing a long, crimson line down the back of his forearm with the point of a fingernail. The cut wasn't very deep, but as she pressed her thumb against the wound, Ian's mind flashed back to the image of his crimson-haired cousin tearing Lord Loman's arm off the same way he'd pull the leg off a roasted duck.

"AAaahhh!" the former baron cried as, for the first time, he contemplated trying to run for the door. But it was impossible with Sybyll's steel grip on his bleeding arm! "I'll talk faster, I, I'm sorry..." he pleaded, willing to say anything to make the pain stop.

"I know how ye treat women, cousin," Sybyll said, running her tongue over her fangs and suppressing the familiar surge of hunger that came with being so close to freshly spilled blood. "They aren't but sacks of grain in yer storehouse ta' ye, so list them out like that. Who were they? What did ye do ta' them, and how did ye hide it?"

"Don't waste me time," she added, giving a final squeeze to the wound on his forearm before dropping it as if it were something foul and unclean. "I still need ta' hear about yer theivin', yer murderin' and yer dealings wit' tha' men who raided Airgead Mountain fer gemstones an' gold..."

In the cell across the aisle, the task Roseen faced should have been easier. After all, she wasn't sitting within a pace or two of Ian Hanrahan while Dame Sybyll tortured him into confessing his crimes. Yet for Roseen, this was anything but easy.

No matter how 'good at it' she had been as a student, she'd never appreciated the lessons her parents sent her to. She could read well, and her sums were all in order, but she rarely practiced any of the things she learned. Instead, much to her father's dismay, she rushed through her lessons before dashing off to one of her father's saw mills, where she would dig around in the bins of scrap wood for small bits and pieces that she could craft into something more artistic.

Her windowsill at home was covered with chunks of branches or small splintered logs that looked like a sparrow was emerging from the wood to take flight, or that a kitten had curled up amidst the bark in order to take a nap. She was a person who thrived on the freedom to roam where she wished and create what she wanted. Just sitting in the cramped cell with cold stone walls and iron bars around her made it difficult to focus on the litany of crimes that tumbled from Bastian Hanrahan's mouth.

"... gave patrol routes to the Broken Hoof gang so they could raid ranches he thought were holding out on him when... Hey, hey, are you even getting this, you stupid sow?" Bastian shouted when he realized that Roseen had become distracted by what was happening to Ian Hanrahan in the cell across the aisle. "This is important, you dumb peasant! My life in exile depends on- OOF!"

Sybyll's fist slammed into Bastian's midriff, driving the air from his lungs and cracking several ribs in the process. No one had even seen her move. One second, she'd been pressing Ian Hanrahan about the luxuries she'd found in his bedchambers, and the very next instant, she was standing over Bastian Hanrahan's gasping figure, clutching a fistful of his tunic.

"Listen here, little lord," she said, placing an intense, disdainful emphasis on 'little lord.' "If ye don't want ta' go in ta' exile as a eunuch, ye'll mind yer words an' treat tha' lass wit' respect. If she's troubled, a gentleman waits his turn till she's ready ta' pay him attention again," she said sharply.

"An' Roseen," Sybyll said. "If he mocks ye again," she said with a dark grin. "Ye just call on me ta' set him straight..."

"Now," she said, as she returned to Ian's cell with inhuman speed. "Yer son just said somethin' interesting about a 'Broken Hoof gang,'" she said as she drew a sharp fingernail just above the surface of her cousin's skin. By now, she didn't even need to cut him in order for the mere memory of pain to send shivers down his spine. "I think they serve a visit from tha' new ruler of Hanrahan, or at least a visit from me soldiers. So tell me, cousin," she said with a dark smile on her crimson lips. "Where can I find this gang of raiders?"

There wasn't much time left before the sun rose, less than an hour now, but Sybyll wasn't willing to compromise in her work.

Her mentor had been right all along, she'd realized. There had been a brief moment of satisfaction when she ground her heel into Ian Hanrahan's foot and let him feel the sort of suffering her mother had endured, but after that... more cruelty didn't bring her any more relief, or satisfaction.

Ian Hanrahan was a dead man, all but swinging from the gallows. She knew it, he knew it, and every moment of agony between now and when he met his fate only delayed her escape from the need to see him die. Prolonging his agony would do nothing for her.

The answers to her questions, however, would do a great deal to help her heal the deep wounds that had been inflicted on the people of Hanrahan. And, as cruel as the experience was for her two little scribes, it would help her decide if her hunch had been right, and they would be worth taking on, or if she should cut them loose now, and find other people who could fill the gaps in the life she hoped to build in her father's homeland.

Chapter 1005: An Executioner (Part One)

Outside of Hanrahan Keep, the sky had begun its slow, gentle shift from night into day. The stars had faded away, and the inky, velvety darkness above had begun to shift toward a lighter, brighter blue. In the east, beyond the gently rolling hills of Hanrahan Barony, a soft golden glow heralded the coming of dawn.

In the dungeon of Hanrahan Keep, Dame Sybyll had taken as much time as she could afford to question Ian Hanrahan. After hours of enduring her questioning, Ian's body was a broken ruin. He'd only attempted to flee once, and the punishment he received, the brutal shattering of every bone in his 'good' leg, had been more than enough for him to learn that any hope he had for a quick death was nothing more than a fantasy.

The former baron had lost count of how many times his merciless 'cousin' had cut into his flesh or pummeled his body because he wasn't comprehensive or honest enough in his confessions. Time after time, she rounded on him for saying he didn't know who his victims were because they weren't important enough to remember.

Any time that happened, she hounded him ruthlessly for places, times, or anything else that could be used to allow her to find out who had suffered for his crimes, but in the end, there had been far too many instances where the only things that he remembered were the schemes and the profits...

Through it all, Cossot's quill pen never stopped moving. At some point, she realized that she'd grown numb to it all. At first, she'd been sickened and furious, but as the night wore on, the words started to lose their meaning. She had filled three pages with names, but by the end, nothing that spilled from Ian Hanrahan's mouth shocked her.

-Ceredynn of Hanrahan Valley, Age Nineteen, taken for 'entertainment' to visit Lothian City, abandoned at the Dancing Doe brothel five years ago, current fate: unknown-

-Claude, Candlemaker of Hanrahan Town, exempt from tithes, skilled at the forging of wax seals and inspection certificates-

-Rupert of Hanrahan Valley, deceased, lands seized and gifted to Willis of Hanrahan Town, fate of Rupert's wife and son unknown-

This list went on and on, and as it neared the end, the grievances and crimes became even more petty. A man embarrassed Ian Hanrahan at court by correctly reciting the laws of the kingdom in his dispute with a neighbor. So, in response, the portly baron had given him his due in court only to 'suggest' to a gang of thieves that his farm would be vulnerable when the guards who patrolled the valley would be busy training for demon raids.

When the poor farmer had lost his life to thieves and raiders, Ian had placed his lands 'in the trust of his neighbor' to oversee until the man's son came of age, only that son had gone missing years ago, leaving the neighbor with everything the slain man had once owned.

It didn't have to be like this... There was no reason for any of this to have happened, and Cossot cursed herself for attending feast after feast with her father, enjoying the bounty of the barony she'd thought was thriving, when that 'bounty' was built on the backs of so much suffering. She'd been blind to it.

But she wasn't blind to it anymore. Over the past few hours, Dame Sybyll's stature grew greater and greater in her eyes as she pulled one confession after another from Ian Hanrahan's battered body. Whether it was justice for the dead or not, Cossot didn't know, but she silently wished that the people who had died because of the baron's schemes could hear his screams from the Heavenly Shores, just to know that he hadn't gotten away with it, and that his victims hadn't all been forgotten.

"It's time," Sybyll said, shaking her head as she looked at the quivering, broken man who had once been an arrogant, ruthless ruler. Hatred still burned in her eyes when she looked at him, for what he had done to her mother, and what he had done to the people of Hanrahan. But that hatred had dimmed, replaced with contempt as the man who had once been invulnerable and unreachable to her now lay helpless before her.

At Sybyll's command, the Iron Tusked guard waiting outside the dungeon took Bastian Hanrahan away. He would be returned to the dungeons soon enough, and other prisoners, like Head Priest Germot, would be brought down as well. But for a moment, Sybyll wanted to be alone with Ian Hanrahan and the two young women she'd pulled into this sordid, bloody world.

"Ye both did well," Sybyll told the young women without taking her eyes off of Ian Hanrahan's broken body. His breathing was labored, and blood trailed from his lips. His complexion was pale, and his eyes were screwed shut against the pain. But despite it all, there was a look of relief on his face when Sybyll said 'it's time.' The end to his suffering, it seemed, had finally arrived.

"Cossot, come here," Sybyll said, gesturing for the willowy young woman to join her next to Ian Hanrahan.

Cossot gasped when she saw what had become of her former lord. Blood stained his once glamorous clothing, and bone could be seen peeking through the wounds on one of his legs. His tunic had been

torn open, and his thick torso was a mass of bruises and cuts. Cossot had heard the meaty impact of Sybyll's fists on his flesh, and she'd heard his tortured screams, but it was only now, when she no longer had her writing to focus all of her attention on, that she saw what the Crimson Knight had physically done to the man who had wronged her.

"I'm gon'a tell ye somethin' that few people know," Sybyll said with surprising gentleness as she stood next to the young woman. "We're not the same, not even close. When me Mistress turned me in ta' one of her progeny, when I became a vampire, she made me different than any who came b'fore me, and I'm different from the one who came after too. We're all different," she said softly.

"Sir Thane is tha' knight who trained me up into knighthood," Sybyll continued, speaking as if Ian Hanrahan wasn't even there, or at least, as if her crimson eyes no longer saw him. "He polished me like a jewel after Mistress scooped me up an' took me in. But I were never meant ta' be like him. He's tha' best of us. He shines like the moon in tha' night, an' if anythin' had happened ta' our Mistress, we'd all follow him ta' avenge her..."

Standing behind her, Roseen's eyes widened in surprise, and she wondered if this 'Sir Thane' might be more than just a knight who trained Dame Sybyll. Her voice held a sort of reverent admiration that went beyond what a person felt for a teacher, even a beloved one, and for a moment, she tried to imagine the sort of man who could capture the heart of a woman like the Crimson Knight.

"I were never meant ta' be tha' sort of knight Sir Thane is," Sybyll continued, oblivious to the flight of fancy taking wing behind her. "He's a man ta' lead us. But Mistress gave me somethin' different. She gave me tha' strength to do what I've done t'night," she said as she clenched her fist. "She made me tha' strongest knight ta' ever don armor an' take up a blade, an' when she did she dubbed me not just a knight, but her Executioner."

"Do ye know what tha' means, lass?" Sybyll asked as she turned to look at Cossot for the first time since she'd begun speaking. The question she asked seemed light, but her next words made it incomparably heavier, and they loomed over Cossot like the blade of an executioner's axe.

"Do ye know what it means ta' carry tha' blade of an Executioner, an' ta bring it down when it needs doin'?"

Chapter 1006: An Executioner (Part Two)

"It means that Ian Hanrahan is about to die," Cossot said, looking up into the crimson eyes of the powerful vampire. "Because, because the lady you serve has decided that now is the time for him to die," she said as she realized the truth that went with those words.

Sybyll had been strong enough to storm the keep and kill Ian Hanrahan for a long time. It was only now that she'd been allowed to that Ian would finally die, but his fate had been sealed long ago, perhaps from the very day that Sybyll had become a vampire. There had been an axe hanging above his head since long ago, he simply hadn't realized it. Or if he'd known, he'd never believed it would really reach his neck.

"Aye, tha' is part of it," Sybyll acknowledged. "But think past me cousin. Ask yerself what it means ta' be a knight an' executioner fer someone more powerful than ye are."

For a moment, Cossot was utterly confused. Why was Sybyll even asking her this? But she didn't dare to keep the powerful knight waiting and so she furrowed her brows in concentration and tried to come up with an answer.

"I, I don't know," Cossot said after thinking for several heartbeats. "I think it's like a promise," she said, looking at Ian Hanrahan's broken body. "He's such a powerful lord, but against you, it doesn't matter. You have the power to make sure he faces justice and that he dies for his crimes. That's what I think it means to be an executioner and a knight. That you'll make sure no one escapes justice for what they've done."

"But if your lady is even more powerful than you are," she added, looking back to Sybyll in confusion. "Then I don't know why she needs you. She could just do this herself. So... I don't know what it means to be someone so strong who serves someone even stronger like this."

"I serve a great an' powerful lady," Sybyll said with a chuckle. "But she can'a be everywhere at once, Cossot," she said lightly. "She cannot do everythin' that needs done. Even now, on tha' eve of such an' important battle, she has greater things than' Hanrahan ta' busy herself wit'. But yer' not completely wrong 'bout tha' promise I am."

"I asked me Mistress fer tha' power ta fell tha' people I hated, ta' claim my vengeance no matter what," Sybyll explained. "An' she gave it ta' me. An then she told me, there would be other people ta' sharpen me axe fer. People who never wronged me, an' needed ta' die, an she asked me if I could do that fer her. I didn'a understand then, but I think I do now..."

As she spoke, Sybyll walked to the corner of the cell and returned after retrieving a long blade, forged from a glittering metal unlike any that Cossot or Roseen had ever seen. The long dagger belonged to Jalal, and Sybyll had borrowed it for exactly this moment.

"I think me Mistress always worried tha' one day, she might need ta' kill a friend," Sybyll said as she looked deeply into Cossot's eyes. "Tha' Eldritch have their conflicts. If one day, she were betrayed by Lord Ritchel in tha' High Pass, or High Lady Erna in tha High Fen... it would be hard fer her ta' kill them, or even ta' kill their heirs."

Lady Nyrielle had lived for centuries. She knew the current Eldritch lords and ladies who were her neighbors from the time they were little more than babes. She'd known their parents, or their predecessors, and she'd been a friend to many of them for generations. If one day, Jalal turned his claws against her, or if one of his children did, it would have been difficult for Nyrielle to take their life.

Sybyll hadn't understood that before. But now, as she stood over the man she hated more than any other, she finally understood some of the struggle her Mistress faced.

"I hate Ian Hanrahan," Sybyll said fiercely. "An' I want him dead more than anythin'. But I don'a have much kin left in this world, an' Ian isn'a just me cousin. He's me cousin Hugo's father. Hugo's a good lad an' Ian weren't much of a father to him, but... when tha' moment comes, it's hard ta' see it done."

"Does he, does he have to die?" Roseen asked from behind Sybyll. "You could exile him, like Bastian. Or keep him locked up down here until... um, for the rest of his life. You don't have to kill him," she offered.

"No," Cossot said, shaking her head. "He has to die. Dame Sybyll said it herself. Her Mistress has decided that now is the time for him to die. He deserves to die for all his crimes. It's just, it's hard for her to swing the axe. But just because it's hard for her, it doesn't mean that he gets to live."

"Just so," Sybyll said with a sad smile as her student arrived at one of the answers she'd been looking for. "He's murdered more an' just me mother, an done things worse 'an death ta many. An' even if we locked him away fer tha' rest of his days, there are always those who wouldn'a believe tha' truth of his crimes. They'd fight ta' rescue him, or return him from exile ta' put him atop tha' throne again. Like as not, they wouldn'a even care fer him. They wouldn'a do it fer loyalty, but fer greed in the hopes tha' he would reward them fer tha' rescue."

"So, since ye understand," she said, flipping the dagger around in her hand to hold the glittering blade while presenting the hilt to Cossot. "Can ye strike tha' blow?" Sybyll asked. "I can tell ye how ta' make it quick. He's suffered enough. I've had me vengeance. Now, it's time fer it ta end."

Roseen's eyes grew wide as they fixed on the blade in Sybyll's hand, and even Ian Hanrahan coughed and sputtered in disbelief as he heard the words drip from Sybyll's lips. She'd come all this way, she'd carved a bloody path through the defenders of Hanrahan Town, shattered the gates of the great hall, hunted him down, jailed him, tortured him, and now she was hesitating... because he was her blood kin? Because she'd taken some kind of liking to his bastard son and didn't want to kill Hugo's father?

Neither Roseen nor Ian Hanrahan believed it, but Cossot didn't see things the way they did. Instead, all of her attention was on the strange, glittering blade of the dagger while Sybyll's words echoed again and again through her mind.

"Can ye strike tha' blow?"

Chapter 1007: Taking Up The Blade

For a handful of heartbeats, Cossot couldn't move. She couldn't speak. All she could see was the hilt of the strangely glittering dagger in Dame Sybyll's hands while her mind raced with the speed of a galloping horse.

Never in her life had she thought that someone should die. No, that wasn't true. She'd been raised from a young age to believe that demons should be purged from the land, and she'd never once questioned it. As a young child, she'd even cheered for some of the young boys in her class when they picked up sticks and acted like knights, fighting off 'demons' to rescue Cossot and Roseen from certain doom.

She'd never once considered that the 'demons' were people too, and after meeting Lady Heila and Dame Sybyll, she was both embarrassed and ashamed that she'd ever cursed them without even knowing them. But she had never in her life wished for the death of a person that she knew, much less thought of taking up a blade to do the deed herself.

She knew Ian Hanrahan. She didn't just know of him the way most common folk did. Her father brought her to banquets for years before this one. She could remember the fallen baron's smiling face when she was barely ten years old and he pinched her cheeks saying 'she'll be a beauty some day.'

She remembered the feast where he'd made a solemn announcement that Bastian had fallen from his horse at a tournament and his fate was uncertain. More recently, she remembered how excited she was that he'd selected her father to join his entourage in Lothian City where she watched the wedding between Lord Owain Lothian and Lady Ashlynn Blackwell. It had been the most beautiful, magical thing she'd ever seen, and she'd been filled with gratitude for the man who invited her family to witness it.

But tonight she'd learned about the cruelty, greed and viciousness that lay beneath Ian Hanrahan's convivial exterior... She'd learned why he was a man who deserved to die, a man who needed to die for what he had done. It was just that, even in her wildest dreams tonight when Dame Sybyll scooped her up like a prize catch from the lake, she'd never imagined that she would be the one to kill Ian Hanrahan.

"Cossot, you don't have to," Roseen said when she saw the hesitation on her friend's face. "Even if he has to die, it, it doesn't have to be you."

"Yer friend isn'a wrong, lass," Sybyll said. "Dawn is almost upon us. I'll sleep soon, an I can'a delay it. So ye need ta' decide if..."

"I'll do it," Cossot said, squeezing her hands into fists as if to crush the hesitation that gripped her. "T-tell me how, and, and I'll do it," she said, reaching out with an unsteady hand to take the hilt of the glittering blade.

The dagger felt strange in her hands and she realized after she gripped it that it had been designed for a hand that was different from human hands. A demon, no, an Eldritch hand with shorter fingers, tipped by claws that left notched grooves in the polished wooden hilt of the blade.

It was also much, much lighter than any dagger of its size should be, and for a moment, she wondered if it had been cast from a weak metal like the tin her father often worked with, yet it felt strong and sturdy in her hand in a way that a dagger cast from tin never would.

"There's a crease, here," Sybyll said, tilting her head to the side to elongate her elegant neck, revealing two faint scars that lingered on her skin long after the night that Lady Nyrielle had made her a vampire. "It's here that ye need ta' cut," Sybyll said, tracing her finger in a line across the crease of her neck, just beneath the jaw.

"The blade is sharp enough ta' do tha' work fer ye," she said as she gently set a hand on Cossot's shoulder and guided her to the side of the captive baron where he lay chained to a crude wood and leather cot. "When I give ye tha' word, just set tha blade along tha' line, press, and pull, just like yer carvin' a roast."

Cossot's stomach clenched into a knot at the thought of slicing a man like a roast and a hot wave of bile surged up her throat, but she forced herself to swallow it back down and steady herself as she approached Ian Hanrahan. She held the blade out in front of herself at waist height, letting the point lead the way as she took one unsteady step after another.

"One last thing, b'fore tha' end," Sybyll said, using the lightest of touches on Cossot's shoulder to still the young woman before she accidentally stabbed Ian with the knife held out in front of her.

Suddenly, the entire room grew darker, gloomier, and much, much colder as Sybyll's crimson eyes filled with an inky blackness that seemed to drink in the light of the room. Her hair drifted and danced in a wind that came from nowhere, and touched only her. Her fangs grew longer, shining and perfectly white next to the deep crimson of her lips as she drew a deep breath.

When she finally spoke, her words echoed from somewhere impossibly far away, as if she were speaking from the bottom of a well or the depths of darkness itself.

"Kiss of the Void," she breathed, allowing her words to fall on Ian Hanrahan like the blade of her axe. "Deathbed's Confession."

Ian Hanrahan's eyes bulged wide as he stared deep into the void of Sybyll's eyes, confronted at last by the reality of death, the afterlife, and the endless emptiness that awaited him on the other side of the razor thin line that separated this life from what lay beyond.

There was nothing for him in that inky blackness. No hope, no salvation, no rebirth and certainly no Heavenly Shores. Only the endless Void, calling out to claim his soul. And somewhere, swirling among the thousands of mournful voices that cried out for him to join them at long last, a whisper reached his ears, one that burrowed past every rational thought in his mind, worming its way between years of religious scripture that he'd only ever paid attention to when it was useful.

'These words will be your last,' the whisper seemed to say. 'Do not waste them!'

Chapter 1008: Confessions (Part One)

"W-what, what is happening?" Roseen stammered as she watched Dame Sybyll transforming from a beautiful young woman into a vision of dark, otherworldly splendor. When she spoke, her words sounded like a pronouncement from beyond the grave, and though it wasn't directed at her, Roseen still felt somewhere deep inside that she should fall to her knees and confess her innermost secrets... before it was too late.

"The Church has their sorcery," Sybyll said softly in a voice that was surprisingly normal. "We have our own as well. I may not be as skilled wit' it as Zedya or Ignatious, but an Executioner should give a man a chance ta' speak his last words. All I've done is ta' ensure his last words are true. A man who lies in tha' face of death can do great harm, but maybe even he has somethin' pure ta say b'fore he dies..."

As noble as Dame Sybyll's intentions might sound, however, when given a chance to make his peace and say his last words, Ian's choice of words was as disappointing as every other choice he'd made for most of his life.

"I'll die first, you murdering whore," Ian said as he stared directly into the eyes of death. "But you'll follow not long after. You made the worst mistake of your life when you harmed Loman Lothain, and his master, the Exemplar, will come for you soon enough. And if he can't kill you, his Holiness the Saint will."

"You act like you're the righteous one," the portly baron sneered. "But you've just doomed every man, woman and child in all of Hanrahan. Whatever my crimes were, yours are a hundred times, a thousand times worse. When the Inquisition arrives, everything I built, everything your precious father built, it will all be consumed by their flames. You doomed them. You doomed everything you claim to care for..."

"Do ye truly have nothin' else ta say?" Sybyll asked as she listened to him pouring out his hatred for her. "No words fer yer wife an' children? No regrets? Ye wish ta' die with venom on yer tongue?"

"What words would I have for that bitch?" Ian said with a disgusted look on his face. "She bore me one defective son, a half-wit who can't even bed a woman without paying her to do the deed, and even then," he snorted. "It's done no good. Hugo has a brain at least, it isn't my seed that's spoiled, it's the vessel that's rotten. Better off without her," he said bitterly.

"I should have never taken such a bad match," he ranted. "And if your stupid father hadn't emptied the treasuries so badly, I would never have had to marry for her family's wealth..."

"There really isn't a anything in ye but piss an' vinegar," Sybyll said, shaking her head at how pathetic the man who had her mother killed seemed now that he was about to die. With the whole of his life stretching behind him, there was no one in his life he had a tender word for, not one regret or person he treasured enough to speak well of... In his world, there had only been people who were beneath him, and the only difference between the people he lorded over seemed to be whether they were useful tools to his ambitions or not.

With a view like that, it was no wonder so many people had disappointed him.

"So be it," Sybyll said, unwilling to give the man any more freedom in his last words. Stepping forward, she loomed over him like a vengeful wraith, becoming so large in his vision that he couldn't even see Cossot standing next to him with a glittering dagger in her hands, poised by his neck and ready to cut.

"Answer me one last question, cousin Ian," she said as she stared down at the pale-faced man who was already on the verge of death after all of the wounds he'd suffered at her hands. "At yer feast t'night, did ye have yer eye on any of tha' women in tha' hall?"

The question surprised Cossot enough that she nearly dropped the knife when she turned to look at Dame Sybyll. It didn't matter, did it? He was about to die, so why did they need to know...

"How nice would it have been," Ian Hanrahan said, sounding wistful for the first time since Dame Sybyll had cursed him to give his deathbed confession. "To have one last tumble in the sheets. I gave up on Rufina, you know. She'd never let herself be alone with a man when it might look improper. At least that lad Niall knows to be grateful to the man who set her on his lap," he said with a bitter chuckle.

"Eleri would have been a nice choice," he said, beginning to ramble as his final moments drew closer and he lost himself in thoughts of what lay beneath the high-necked dresses and voluminous skirts the daughter of a local money lender wore. "But her father's too important to risk offending. Roseen would have -URK! URRGLLLLL..."

Ian Hanrahan's voice cut off sharply as Cossot's hand moved, striking at the crease in his neck as if by reflex the instant she heard Roseen's name on his lips. She hadn't even realized that she'd moved until a spurt of thick, red blood flew from the wound in his neck, splattering across her chest and face.

-TING TING TING-

The sound of the dagger clattering to the ground filled the air, blending with the portly baron's last, choked cries as his heart pumped blood to the deep, gaping wound in his neck, spilling it in a pool across the floor. Cossot clutched her hands to her chest, unable to look away from the bloody wound that she'd inflicted, even as she backed away from the quickly spreading pool of blood.

"I, I didn't mean to, I... I didn't think, I just," she stammered as she backed away.

"Cossot," Roseen said, stepping around Dame Sybyll to wrap her arms around her pale-faced and trembling friend. "It's all right," she whispered in the most gentle, soothing tone she could manage as she turned Cossot away from the dying baron. "It's all right, you just did... did what you were supposed to do... You didn't do anything wrong," she said, doing her best to reassure her friend even as she struggled to process what had just happened...

Chapter 1009: Confessions (Part Two)

Ever since his crimes had been exposed, Roseen had wondered if she'd been someone the lecherous baron had his eyes on, but to hear it straight from his lips had still been shocking. To see the way her friend reacted to it, though, was even more so.

"I just, when he said your name, I couldn't... I couldn't let him say any more of those vile things. Not, not about you, I couldn't..." Cossot said as she clung to her friend.

She thought that she'd prepared herself to do what needed to be done. To strike the blow on Dame Sybyll's behalf because it was a thing that needed to be done. Because Dame Sybyll couldn't bring herself to kill one of the few people left in this world who were still her blood kin.

But when the time came, it hadn't been his crimes that moved her hand, or her desire to spare Dame Sybyll from needing to kill a member of her own family.

Her hand had moved to shield Roseen from harm, and when the moment was upon her, she hadn't even realized that she'd moved until the deed was already done. The knife wasn't just sharp, it was unlike any blade she'd ever held, and she barely felt resistance at all when it parted the captive baron's flesh, more like a spoon through soft pudding than a knife cutting meat. And just like that, less than a dozen heartbeats later, Ian Hanrahan died, choking on his own blood as his heart pumped the red liquid of life onto the cold dungeon floor.

"Thank ye," Sybyll said, resting a hand gently on Cossot's shoulder. The darkness had left her eyes, and her hair no longer danced in a phantom wind. She still seemed less human than she had before, as if she had drained away a portion of her strength and majesty when she used her sorcery. Or perhaps it was the imminent approach of dawn that left her looking almost frail as she offered what comfort she could to the young woman who had claimed Ian Hanrahan's life.

"Ye did what I couldn'a do, an' ye did what had ta' be done," she said gently. "But dawn is upon us, an' I need ta' rest. Cossot," Sybyll said as she took a handkerchief and gently wiped away the blood that had splattered on the young woman's face. "Go upstairs an' seek out Lady Heila. She can help ye ta' clean yerself up an' find a place ta' bed down fer tha' day. I'll see ye' again when night falls."

"All, all right," Cossot said, pulling back from Roseen's embrace and looking hesitantly toward the door. She wanted to go, she wanted more than anything to leave the cramped place where Ian Hanrahan's cooling body lay, but at the moment, she didn't want to step away from Roseen, and Dame Sybyll seemed to have turned her attention to her dearest friend.

"Cossot," Sybyll said, cursing herself for needing to rush against the coming of the sun. But as she looked into Cossot's lost and trembling eyes, she realized that she'd made a grave mistake in holding back too much about her intentions.

She was now certain that she'd been right about the potential she saw in the brave young woman who stood up in the great hall when so many others cowered and hid under tables, but Cossot didn't know or understand why all of this had been so necessary.

The young woman had succeeded in transforming herself from helpless prey into a fledgling predator, but with that transformation came a great deal of loss. There were tender parts of her that had been cut just as deeply as Ian Hanrahan's neck, and those tender parts would never be the same again, if they healed at all.

Sybyll herself had cut those parts of herself away years ago, even before Lady Nyrielle had transformed her into a vampire, but she'd forgotten what it meant to lose them. When she had transformed herself from a victim into an avenger, she'd known why she was doing it, and she was driven by intense hatred and an unrelenting desire to see the people who had wronged her and her mother die.

But Cossot didn't have anything close to that, and her brief, momentary impulse to protect Roseen wouldn't be enough to carry her through the day unless Sybyll could give her something to strive toward.

"Cossot," Sybyll repeated. "Ye've done what I couldn'a do, and I've seen tha' truth of what's in yer heart. But, I have a confession of me own ta make," she said as she looked into the other woman's limpid eyes. "I know what Lady Heila said ta' ye, but she were wrong about me intentions fer ye. Ye aren't a woman meant ta' be a maidservant or lady-in-waiting tha' way tha' Lady Heila is fer Her Dominion or Madame Zedya is fer me Mistress."

If all she wanted was a loyal servant who could follow behind her, even when she walked into the darkest of places, then acting as a scribe would have been enough, and that was exactly why Sybyll hadn't asked more from Roseen than what she had done. Well, that, and one other test that had nothing to do with whether or not Roseen was capable of serving her and everything to do with whether or not she would allow Roseen to follow along beside Cossot.

Now that she'd seen what she needed to see, however, it was time to find a way to make things right after the series of blunders that had led her to nearly breaking a young woman whom she intended to nurture and guide for many years to come.

"I never intended ta' have ye follow tha' path tha' Lady Heila did," Sybyll said. "Ye have courage in yer heart, an steel in yer soul an' I'll need both of those at me side in tha' days an' years ta' come. Not as a maid-servant, but as me squire, an' when tha' time comes, an' yer training is complete, as a knight in yer own right."

"A, a knight?" Cossot asked, shocked at the notion of it almost as much as she was shocked by the fact that Dame Sybyll had even considered her worthy of such a position. "But, I'm not strong enough to wield a sword and I don't know how..."

"Did ye think I were always a mighty woman?" Sybyll said with a wry smile, tugging at the corner of her lips. She'd thought the notion that she would become a knight was ludicrous once as well, when

Mistress Nyrielle introduced her to Sir Thane, but that was before she received the Potence of Blood, the powerful gift that made her unique among Nyrielle's progeny.

"I can do fer you what were done fer me, but there's much more to it than just a bit of sorcery an' I have no time ta' explain it all now. I'll speak wit' ye more when night falls again," Sybyll promised as she gently tucked a stray lock of hair behind the young woman's ear. "Ye don'a need ta' decide anything just yet. I want ye ta' understand what it means ta' choose this life an I will na' force ye. I believe in ye, but fer now, ye need ta' rest almost as much as I do. So go. See Lady Heila an' get yerself settled."

"I'll send yer friend to ye soon," Sybyll added as she turned her gaze to Roseen. "But first, I have a few words meant fer her alone..."

Chapter 1010: Roseen's Secret Revealed (Part One)

Cossot lingered for only a moment, giving Roseen's hand a final squeeze before she headed upstairs in search of Lady Heila.

Meanwhile, in the dungeon, Sybyll tottered on her feet, leaning against the cold iron bars of Ian Hanrahan's cell to hold herself up as the impending dawn pressed down on her. Still, she refused to flee from the sun while there was still one last important matter to attend to.

"Ye don'a have ta' pretend now," Sybyll told Roseen, who stood stiffly rooted to the spot where she'd held Cossot, looking as if she wanted nothing more than to race after her departed friend to escape this place of darkness and death. "I know ye've been forcing yerself fer her sake," Sybyll added.

"You, you don't look well," Roseen said with a conflicted look on her face. She had other things she wanted to say, things she'd been bottling up, but when she looked at the powerful vampire knight looking so drained and exhausted, it was hard to focus on the maelstrom of feelings that swirled in her heart.

"I'm resistin' tha' pull of dawn," Sybyll said with a bitter, self-deprecating smile. "Me own fault fer takin' me time wit' me cousin. But if I leave things unsaid, ye may do somethin' rash durin' tha' day, an' I can't have that."

"It's true fer ye too," Sybyll added as she looked at the curvy young woman. "Ye have things ta' say ta' me tha' ye didn'a want ta' say when Cossot were here, so say them now. I can see them all caught up in yer throat. I won't hurt ye, no matter what ye say."

"I don't believe you," Roseen said, refusing to move from her spot as she glared at the vampire. "I don't know if I even believe that you're weak right now. You lied to Cossot to make her kill the old baron," she said, pursing her lips together and clenching both of her hands into tight fists.

"I don't believe for even a minute that you couldn't swing your axe at him after everything he's done to you," the young woman said with hot tears forming in her eyes. "You, you did all that to him," she said, pointing to the broken, torn ruin of Ian's body, twisted and tattered after enduring hours of Sybyll's torture.

"You did all that, and you couldn't end his life?" Roseen said in disbelief, her voice growing louder and higher-pitched with every word. "He'd probably have died from his wounds if you just left him there for a while! She didn't, she didn't need to do that, but you lied to her to make her do it!"

"And now," the young woman continued as she glared at the crimson-haired vampire. "Now, you're acting like you're weak so I'll lower my guard. You just want to manipulate me the way you manipulated her, to turn her into an Executioner like you! But she didn't have to," Roseen said as tears rolled down her soft cheeks. "She didn't have to..."

"Yer right," Sybyll said, accepting most of the accusations without bothering to deny them. "I guided her hand t'night b'cause I needed ta' know if she were a woman who could kill a man tha' needed killin'," Sybyll said. "If she'd refused, I'd have done tha' deed meself. I never meant ta' force her ta' change her nature, but I wanted ta' understand if she had what it takes within her ta strike tha' blow."

"And you think that offering to make her a knight makes up for what you did to her?" Roseen said, remembering the pale-faced look of shock on Cossot's face after she dropped the knife and the way her voice shook as she stammered that she hadn't meant to kill him. "Is this all some kind of chess game to you? You're playing with her life! Why would you do that to her?"

"I always intended ta' take her in an' train her as a knight," Sybyll said, frowning as she realized how things looked to the privileged young woman before her. "Ye think I'm like a rough parent, trotting out a fine doll ta' make up fer doin' wrong. But ye've got it backwards. I didn'a tell her I wished ta train her as a knight ta' make up fer tha' wrong I did," she explained.

"I told her I'd train her up so she could dream of a future instead of gettin' mired in what she did," Sybyll said. "I know I did wrong wit' her," she admitted. "I'll do wrong wit' her again an' again. But I'll do wrong b'cause I'm tryin' ta' do right by her, an' I'm tryin' ta' do right by many more people too. Just like I'm tryin' ta' do right by ye now," she added.

"But I'm not deceiving ye about me weakness," she added. "An' I'm runnin out of time. So help me ta' tha end of tha' hall. Me bed is waitin' there, an' I need ta' return to it soon."

"You, you really are weak?" Roseen said, taking a hesitant step toward Sybyll, realizing for the first time that her lustrous crimson hair now looked faded and dull, and the woman who had appeared to be in her early twenties now looked like she was rapidly approaching forty with faint lines appearing at the edge of her eyes and lips that no longer seemed as full and lush as they had just moments ago.

"Ye think it's an easy thing ta' resist tha' sun's rise?" Sybyll said with a faint chuckle. "A vampire's power isn't a free, lass. For all tha' we gain in tha' night, we lose tha' day entirely. So, if ye want ta' understand why I did what I did, I need yer help ta' make it ta' tha end of tha' hall an' me bed."

"Otherwise, just like wit' Ian, I'll have ta' do it meself," she added. "But I won't be up fer conversation while I drag meself ta bed. So choose, an' choose quickly. Do ye want answers? Or do ye want ta' keep your distance?"

"Is this another one of your tests?" Roseen asked, pausing after taking half a step toward the vampire. She hated the idea that this powerful woman had manipulated Cossot into killing someone, and she hated the idea that she was being manipulated by the vampire even now.

And yet.. When she confronted Dame Sybyll about what she'd done, the older woman hadn't denied it. Instead, she'd admitted that she'd done wrong and that she was trying to find a way to make things right...

"Life is a test, lass," Sybyll said. "Keep hesitatin' an' ye'll fail it straight away. I know Cossot is braver than ye are, lass," she added with a pointed look. "But ye need ta' show ye can be brave as well. Give me a hand, or go away, I've no more time ta' waste on yer choosin'..."