

The Vampire 911

Chapter 911: A Light Dusting (Part One)

Not far from where Dame Sybyll's army camped, an outcropping of rock surrounded by large boulders stood out from the forest around it like a stone finger pointing toward the distant Southern Steppe.

As the sun sank toward the horizon in the west, two figures standing atop the stones seemed to glow faintly in against the darkening sky, seeming to the people gathered below as if they were surrounded in faint halos that shifted from cool, icy blue to vibrant silvery green and half a dozen other colors in between.

Even brighter than the setting sun or the energy surrounding the people atop the stone was the shining, iridescent sword held by the taller of the two figures that glowed so brightly that it cast dancing, color-shifting shadows on the people watching from the ground below.

Hauke's eyes were closed as he focused all of his attention on the Runic Blade of Eternal Ice in his hands, connecting his mind with the intricate patterns and ancient runes embedded in the long sword by the Frost Architect, Eraric. As he worked, his iridescent horn glowed in a shifting array of pale colors, matching the colors of the powerful relic in his hands.

At first, Hauke had been intimidated by the Runic Blade, fearing that it contained traps laid down by the same ancestor who trapped Hauke's spirit within his own mind, binding him with icy shackles while the other ancestors used his body to fight against Ashlynn. When the deranged artificer, Erkembalt, handed the weapon over to Hauke, however, he assured the young Frost Walker that the weapon was 'safe', at least in the sense that it contained no traps for an unwary wielder.

Now, after using the relic for several days, Hauke's apprehension had turned into a combination of eagerness and wonder as he supplied energy to the weapon, working his sorcery through the sword in much the same way that a witch might use their wand to work witchcraft, except in this case, the blade did far more than simply acting as a conduit for its wielder's will.

Deep within the layers of ice that formed the sword, carefully carved runes guided Hauke's power the way a whitesmith's molds guided the flow of molten tin, forming it into intricate, complex shapes that Hauke would have struggled to envision clearly while directing the flow of so much energy.

When Ines, the Unending Blizzard, had tutored Hauke in shaping weather, it had taken all of his concentration to create a single, luminous sky ribbon, reaching up into the frozen winds high above the mountains for a source of greater cold to channel into the first blocks of Eternal Ice to be created in the High Pass in hundreds of years.

With the Runic Blade of Eternal Ice in his hands, however, Hauke was able to conjure eight iridescent streams of sorcery that stretched out across the sky, so faint against the setting sun that only people who were exceptionally sensitive to the flow of energy in the world, like the diminutive witch standing next to him, could even perceive their presence.

"I'm sorry, Heila," Hauke said, keeping his eyes closed as he stretched his senses as far across the sky as they were able to extend. "I've used up almost all the water in the sky for as far as I can reach. There's only enough left for a dusting of fresh snow in the valley tonight and then it will be days before the skies hold enough water for heavy snows again."

"A light dusting is fine," Heila said with a smile as she heard the confidence in the young Frost Walker's assessment. He might be apologetic about the answer he had given her, but unlike a few days ago when he had only begun to use the Runic Blade, he didn't couch his assessment in qualifiers of 'I think', 'I can try', or 'maybe it will work.'

He knew what he could do and what he couldn't, and he didn't hesitate to admit when he had reached the limits of what he could do.

"Even if snow only falls on the town itself," Heila added. "It will still encourage the people to stay within their homes. The more we can do to keep the townsfolk behind closed doors when we attack the city, the fewer innocent people will die by getting caught up in the battle. So do what you can before the sun sets, and clear the skies of clouds afterward."

"I understand," the young Frost Walker said. "Do you, do you really think it will work?" Hauke asked, finally opening his pale eyes as he turned to look at the witch who had been a constant source of support and guidance since they left the Vale of Mists.

Hauke was further away from his home than he'd ever been, and further away from the High Pass than any Frost Walker had gone since High Lord Torbin died and the Vale of Mists fell to human invaders more than a hundred years ago. He was alone among a sea of strangers with very few friends, and yet the soldiers of the Second Army looked at him with eyes that held the same respect, admiration, and heavy expectations that Hauke had seen in so many of his clansmen in the High Pass.

The pressure he felt was immense, and many of the plans Dame Sybyll had made relied on Hauke's ability to wield the Runic Blade of Eternal Ice to manipulate the weather. Now, as he prepared to make his final attempt to bring about a snowstorm before the battle was set to begin, his heart trembled with worry that it wouldn't be enough, and his horn pulsed with a faint, pale green glow of uncertainty.

"I don't know, Hauke," Heila said gently, resting a hand lightly on the Frost Walker's lower back as she stood beside him. "Lady Ashlynn says that, when you play chess, you can try to force your opponent's hand, but you can never know what's in their mind or how they'll really move when the time comes. I think this is what she was talking about," she said, wishing for the dozenth time tonight that Ashlynn had been able to join them for what would soon be the largest battle of the Winter War thus far.

"We've done what we can," Heila said in the most reassuring tone she could manage. "Hopefully, your blizzard has frightened the humans enough that they'll run and hide as soon as the first snowflakes start to fall, but if they don't... Dame Sybyll still has a few methods of her own to encourage people to stay indoors," she said gently. "You just have to do your part."

"All right," Hauke said, drawing a deep, steadying breath and closing his eyes once again to return his focus to his sorcery and the Runic Blade in his hands. "I'll do my best," he promised.

Chapter 912: A Light Dusting (Part Two)

In Hauke's mind's eye, seven of the eight streams of iridescent energy radiating outward from the Runic Blade of Eternal Ice transformed into wide nets, dragging across the sky in an area that covered several leagues as he gathered up all of the moisture in the air and funneled it toward the the final, eighth stream that connected to the clouds over Hanrahan Town.

Throughout the forest, the tallest trees bent and swayed as frigid winds blew, carrying what little moisture remained in the bitter, frigid air and offering it up like wisps of frozen clouds to the snow storm that slowly gained strength over Hanrahan town.

Hauke had called it a 'light dusting' and he meant that in more ways than one. The fresh snow that began to fall was fine and powdery, drifting on the wind and hanging in the air as if it was in no hurry to reach the ground. Far from the thick, heavy flakes that had heralded the beginning of the blizzard, this snow felt almost playful as it descended on the snow covered town.

The people of Hanrahan, however, had no way of knowing that the light, tiny snowflakes would only fall for half an hour before stopping entirely. As soon as the first flakes began to fall, townsfolk began hurrying to finish their business, rushing to return home before the storm could grow worse.

"I told ye we should'a gone ta' market sooner," a young woman said as she drew a shawl over her reddish-blond hair with one hand while the other hand balled up into a tiny fist that hammered at her husband's back. "Look, now tha' shops are closin' up an' turnin' folks away!"

"How was I s'posed ta know it would snow again?" the poor berated husband said as he shrank back from his furious wife. "Tha' crowds this mornin' were nottin' short of a flood 'o people. Ya' think it would'a done any good ta' be out in that rush? I heard tha' butcher started havin' people bid on tha' good cuts 'cause there were so many people clammerin' fer' 'em that a pound 'o good beef went fer a whole penny!"

"Cheapskate," his wife snorted as she pointed at the half filled basket of food her husband carried as they rushed back toward their home. "We're still havin' tongue stew an' millet fer dinner, an' we still paid five snips fer it! An' ye drank the last o' tha' stiff ale, so I'm makin' stew wit water fer tha' broth tonight..."

The couple weren't the only ones complaining about not finishing their errands before the snow began to fall again, nor were they the only ones cursing the greedy merchants of the city for setting sky high prices just because there were people with coin enough to pay them.

Whether they were grateful for what they were able to buy in the markets or angry about how little they came away with, the other thing that many of them had in common was a deep desire to shut themselves away in their homes, curling up beneath their blankets by the hearth and filling their bellies with something warm and comforting while they waited out the next wave of the cruel winter storm.

Other townsfolk, however, people in the poorest quarters of the city whose homes had suffered the greatest damage in the blizzard, chose to abandon their homes entirely, packing into pubs and alehouses by the dozens or rushing to the great Temple of the Holy Lord of Light in search of a place to take shelter from the approaching storm.

"Please, no pushing or shoving," a harried looking acolyte dressed in white robes with a bright golden collar told the crowd as he stood at the gates of the temple. Just an hour ago he'd been cursing the meddling of the Temple Guard from Lothian City but now that people had started rushing to take shelter

in within the sturdy stone walls of the temple, he was grateful for the support of the impressive soldiers as they formed ranks to control the crowd.

"There's room enough for everyone to take shelter in the Light," the acolyte said. "But the courtyard is filled with pyres for the fallen who died in last night's storm," he added as he pleaded with the crowd to calm themselves. "Please, still your tongues and walk calmly to the chapel while the people in the courtyard wish their loved ones a swift journey to the Heavenly Shores."

"See Brother Morcan as you pass if you have anything to offer for the collection," another acolyte called, pointing to a third acolyte accompanied by two strong men from the Temple Guard who held a strong-box with a small hole in the top for receiving donations. "We're collecting for the families in need and for the temple to keep the hearth's burning through the night...."

Of course, there were many in the crowd who questioned how many of the coins collected in the strong-box would actually reach the families in need after losing loved ones to the blizzard, but no one dared to give voice to those doubts in the presence of so many armored soldiers of the Temple Guard.

Instead, many of them fished in their coin purses, pulling out at least a snip or two and dropping them in the box so they didn't look like heartless monsters in front of their friends and neighbors. Even if they didn't want to part with what little money they had to spare, they were far more afraid of another night facing the ravages of the storm and many of them feared that if they didn't make a 'donation' they might be driven out of the temple during the night if it became too crowded.

Better to tithe and survive the storm than to die in the cold over a few snips of tin...

Meanwhile, in the wilderness outside of town, Heila stood behind Hauke on the outcropping of rock, focusing on her witchcraft and drawing strength from the surrounding forest to supply a steady, nourishing flow of energy to Hauke as he worked his sorcery.

Even with the Runic Blade of Eternal Ice, it should have been impossible for a single sorcerer, even one as talented as Hauke, to create a storm that affected such a wide area. Even Ines, the Unending Blizzard, would have needed to gather up a circle of at least a dozen sorcerers to provide energy to do what Hauke had done, and even then, it would have cost those sorcerers dearly to do it multiple days in a row the way Hauke had.

Working with Heila, however, the diminutive witch was able to supply the Frost Walker sorcerer with energy drawn directly from the forest around them, tapping into the powerful reserves of cedar trees that had lived for more than a century and even more powerful western hemlock that had been growing in the forest since before the first human set foot on the eastern shores of the continent.

In time, when Amahle's coven was able to bring Lady Ashlynn the seed she needed to shape Hauke's seed of witchcraft, he wouldn't need Heila's help to do what he was doing, but for now, the diminutive witch did as a big sister should, helping her little brother to approach the power of a witch before he officially joined the coven.

The snow would only fall for half an hour and it would never grow heavy enough to do any damage on its own. The most it could accomplish was to drive people back into their homes at the end of the day, but Heila hoped that it would be enough and that people wouldn't decide to venture out into the night again as soon as they realized the snow had stopped.

Because if they did... if they were wrong about how the people of Hanrahan Town would respond to the last bit of snow that Hauke could wring from the sky and the streets became clogged with people returning home rather than staying wherever they'd gone to seek shelter, then the soft, delicate snow that was meant to keep them safe in the coming battle would turn red with the blood of innocents, and Hauke and Heila would have only themselves to blame for a tragedy that even the most bloodthirsty soldiers among the Eldritch wanted to prevent.

Chapter 913: Liam Dunn's Conflicted Heart (Part One)

Beneath the rock outcropping, Liam Dunn sat on a small boulder, his brow furrowed in thought as his gaze wandered between the glowing pair of figures on the outcropping and the strange collection of people beneath it.

On one side, the young lord had almost become accustomed to the presence of the diminutive 'squire' named Emmie who Lady Heila had assigned as a caretaker for both Liam and Hugo Hanrahan. Despite the horns on her head and the strange, clipped accent that clung to her speech in the king's common tongue, her manner and bearing were so similar to the other squires Liam had known that he could almost forget that she wasn't just another human servant, tending to the needs of the gathered lords.

Of course, he couldn't think of a single woman who would have put up with the abuse that most knights heaped on their squires in the name of 'character building,' nor would he have wanted to see a human woman dragged through the wilderness to the edge of battlefields the way a squire was, but Emmie

seemed just as devoted and willing to face the hardships of her station as any young man Liam had seen struggling under a knight's unforgiving tutelage.

Liam had even become accustomed enough to the short, horned warrior that accompanied the young squire that he could almost pretend that the man was just another guard rather than his personal jailer among the 'Eldritch.'

Of course, the man's armor and equipment, an eclectic mix of the Vale of Mists' new harlequin patterned gambeson and intricately detailed plate armor covering his arms and torso made it clear that Kurtz was anything but an ordinary guard, but at the moment, the man didn't even feel like a soldier as much as he felt like a doting parent watching over his excited daughter.

"Father, do you think that I'll be able to control the weather like young lord Hauke one day?" Emmie asked excitedly as she watched the Frost Walker with the iridescent horn and the glowing Runic Blade stretching his sorcery across the sky as far as the eye can see and beyond.

"Lady Heila says he isn't even a witch yet and he can do all this with sorcery alone," she gushed excitedly.

"That depends on you, Emmie," Kurtz said as he tapped one of her horns affectionately. "Have you been practicing your sorcery when you aren't tending to your charges?"

"I have, I have, look," she said with a smile on her face that was as bright as the setting sun before she carefully schooled her expression into one of intense focus. "Light. Golden. Gather to my hand," she intoned, holding out one hand and imagining the warmth that she felt within her chest flowing toward her fingertips to draw in the last fading light of the day until a small golden light, no brighter than a candle flame, appeared on the tip of each of her fingers.

"See, see? I have been practicing," she cried excitedly before she lost her concentration on the energy she'd collected and the sorcery unraveled before her eyes, snuffing out the lights like candle flames in the wind.

"Well done, Emmie," Kurtz praised as he reached out to ruffle his daughter's hair. "But I think you're going to need to put in a lot more practice than that if you want to match up to young lord Hauke

someday," he said in a stern, fatherly tone that reminded Liam of his own father when he was much younger.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to seeing things like that," Liam said quietly to the young lord sitting next to him. "Can you imagine what would happen if that little girl did that at the temple in Lothian City?"

"A 'demon' summoning light to her hand like the chosen miracle workers of the Holy Lord of Light?" Hugo said with a chuckle that contained equal parts of mirth and horror. "She'd be declared a heretic and burned at the stake if she wasn't executed on the spot, and anyone who ever spoke of seeing it would share her fate or worse," he said as he shook his head.

"Even if she could bathe the temple in golden light, heal the sick and call down Holy Flames, it wouldn't change anything," Hugo added as he met Liam's gaze directly. "The Church would sooner destroy a girl like her than admit that they've been wrong about the Eldritch for hundreds of years."

"Do you really think they've been wrong about the Eldritch?" Liam asked. The things he'd seen since his capture had certainly shaken the foundations of what he knew about the 'demons' he'd fought against since he was old enough to carry a sword into battle, but he still wasn't convinced that he had been on the wrong side of the centuries long conflict.

"We're about to raid your home town," Liam pointed out. "No, not raid. Conquer. Hundreds of men who have pledged their lives to your father's service are about to die for a grudge that has nothing to do with them and their families are already suffering from this fiendish storm. Are you still convinced that the Church was wrong to teach us to fear the Eldritch?"

While his words were as sharp as knives, Liam's question was genuine. Lady Ashlynn's offer of a greater position for the Dunn family in the new kingdom she intended to build was something he hadn't forgotten and part of him was eager to seize it before it was too late to prove his worth to the powerful witch.

Another part of him, however, couldn't let go of everything he had known and experienced in his years living on the frontier. He had fought the Eldritch, he'd been wounded by them, lost good friends to them and avenged those friends by spilling Eldritch blood on the battlefield and burning their villages to the ground in order to expand the borders of Dunn Barony.

The Eldritch were his enemy and they always had been, yet ever since his capture, he'd found it harder and harder to think of them in the same black and white way he'd thought of them before.

"No, I don't think the Church was wrong to teach us to fear the power of the Eldritch," Hugo said as his dark brows wrinkled in thought and he chose his words with exceptional care. "But I do think that the Church was wrong to teach us to hate them. And I think they were wrong to teach us that we could never live together peacefully."

"Even if we never invited them into our cities or our homes," Hugo said as he looked at the looming figure of the giant Tuscan captain, Ipiktok who followed Lady Heila wherever she went in the army camp. "We could at least have become good neighbors and traded with them instead of trying to plunder everything they have."

"Coexistence, even an uneasy truce would be much better than provoking a war with an enemy we can never hope to defeat," Hugo said solemnly as he raised a questioning eyebrow at Liam. "Don't you think so too? Or do you still think that Marquis Bors has a chance of winning this war against Lady Ashlynn?"

Chapter 914: Liam Dunn's Conflicted Heart (Part Two)

"Do you still think that Marquis Bors has a chance of winning this war against Lady Ashlynn?"

Hugo's question hung in the air like a headsman's axe, ready to fall on Liam Dunn and the young lord struggled to find an honest way to answer it as doubts wracked his mind.

"I know the Eldritch are powerful," Liam admitted as he looked at the glowing Runic Blade that a single Eldritch sorcerer could use to bend the weather to his will, covering leagues of Hanrahan Barony in a blizzard fiercer than any they'd seen in a dozen years or more. "But we have powerful warriors of our own, and men who can command the power of the Holy Lord of Light to turn the tide of battles."

"Remember," Liam said, holding up a finger to count off the points of the argument that was starting to form in his mind. "Sir Tommin is in Hanrahan Town and he wields a Holy Light Blade. The men who fought by his side this past summer said that he could cleave through three dem-er, three Eldritch soldiers at once, even when they were hiding behind trees, and he did it from ten paces away."

Of course, Templars like Tommin who were devout enough to wield a Holy Light Blade were rare, but the same could be said about sorcerers like the Frost Walker lord, Hauke. From everything that Liam had

been able to learn in his days with the army, Hauke wasn't just exceptional for being able to wield the Runic Blade of Eternal Ice. He was a unique Frost Walker with a special iridescent horn that gave him greater power than any of his clansmen.

There was no doubt that Hauke was one of the most powerful champions the Eldritch could send to the battlefield, but humans had champions of their own to counter men like Hauke.

"I haven't seen Inquisitor Diarmuid fight personally, but I've fought beside plenty of Inquisitors in the past, and since he's come from the Holy City, I expect that Diarmuid's Holy Flames burn even hotter than Inquisitor Percivus's," Liam added.

"What about Lord Loman?" Hugo asked without commenting on the others. "He accompanied you this summer when you fought against the Eldritch villages, didn't he? How does he compare to Lady Heila?"

"To Lady Heila?" Liam asked, blinking in surprise at the comparison before he remembered the conversations he'd had with Sir Carwyn Belvin about the way she healed his wounds and the wounds of his men.

When he'd seen the diminutive witch in her armored leather coat, wearing the strange hat that had been crafted from the same sort of armored leather and adorned with half a dozen strange ornaments tucked into the hat band, he'd had a hard time seeing her as anything other than a terrifying witch who would reap the lives of dozens of soldiers with the powers at her command and the whip at her hip.

The prickly aura she radiated only made the impression worse and he felt like he would suffer dozens of cuts all over his body just for coming within a dozen paces of her. To compare her to the calm, kind and utterly devoted Loman Lothian felt almost sacrilegious. But when he considered that she was also the most powerful healer traveling with the Eldritch army, the comparison became much more apt.

"Loman Lothian is the greatest healer I've ever seen among the priests of the Church," Liam said definitively. "I don't say that lightly, or ignorantly" he added when Hugo gave him a doubtful look. "I'm not saying he's the greatest healer in the Church," he clarified. "But I've met dozens of Temple Masters, Head Priests, even High Priests in Lothian City, Keating City and elsewhere in Keating Duchy when I was away for school."

"You studied in Keating, didn't you Hugo?" Liam asked. "You've probably seen a few of the Church's great healers yourself."

"I did study in Keating," Hugo replied, ducking his head awkwardly in embarrassment. "But I was the bastard son that my father wanted to hide away in a school that mostly trained merchants to manage ledgers and stewards to oversee estates. It's not the same as attending the Duke's Academy in Keating City," he said pointedly.

"Well, still," Liam said, stumbling over his words slightly when he realized his mistake, and trying to plaster over it by returning to his actual point. "I've seen plenty of the Church's healers, but Loman is better than any of the ones I've met. He heals things alone that the Church would summon a dozen acolytes to help with, and he barely leaves a scar behind on the men he treats."

"That only means he's skilled among his peers," Hugo countered. "I haven't heard you say that he could heal something that Lady Heila couldn't, but look at her now and remember that she defeated Captain Ipiktok over there with nine more giants at his side, all by herself. Do you think Loman Lothian could do the same?"

"No," Liam admitted with a heavy sigh. "As healers, he might be her equal, I can't say. But as a warrior... I never saw Loman come to the battlefield as anything other than a healer. I know there are priests who can call down spears of holy light to smite their enemies, and Loman might well be one of them, but if he's capable of those divine miracles, I never saw him create one."

"What about my cousin, Sybyll?" Hugo asked as he pressed his point. "You met her last night. Do you really think that Sir Tommin Pyre is her match, Holy Light Blade or not?"

"Don't, don't mention your cousin," Liam said as his cheeks heated in embarrassment. When Liam first laid eyes on the crimson-haired vampire, he hadn't even recognized her as anything other than human, and for the first time since his darling Illa went missing, he felt a pang of yearning for the most beautiful woman he'd ever encountered.

It wasn't until he'd made an utter fool of himself, stumbling over his words while he gave a full courtly bow of introduction, that Hugo had introduced her as the dreaded Crimson Knight, slayer of hundreds of men, defender of Airgead Mountain, vampire progeny of the Demon Lady of the Vale of Mists... and Hugo's own cousin.

"I still can't believe the two of you are related," Liam said stiffly. "She must get her looks from her mother, because you certainly didn't inherit a fraction of her charm."

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that," Hugo snorted as he realized the effect his cousin was having on the young lord. "You know she's twice your age, though, right? She's only a few years younger than my father."

"That... that's hard to believe," Liam said as he recalled her smooth, flawless skin and the youthful, almost flirtatious tone in her voice when she spoke. "But if you want to know how she measures up to Sir Tommin," he said as he fought to drag the conversation back to safer territory.

"She's a creature of the night, isn't she?" Liam Dunn finally said with a heavy sigh. "No matter how strong she is, Sir Tommin carries a blade that shines with the Holy light of the sun. Against that kind of power, is there anything she can really do?"

As he spoke the words, Liam struggled to understand the web of feelings they conjured in his heart. Part of him felt like he was preparing to watch a tragedy unfold as he finally met a woman who made him forget about his long-lost Illa, only to watch her die in battle against one of the Church's holiest warriors.

Another part of him hoped that she would triumph over Sir Tommin, giving him hope for a future they could build together if he could convince his father to accept Lady Ashlynn's offer to join her new kingdom. But for that to happen, he would have to completely turn his back on the world he knew and forsake the Kingdom of Gaal and all that it stood for.

He didn't know how he should feel about any of it... The Eldritch, the war, the battle ahead or the captivating, crimson-haired creature who he might willingly offer his neck to if only she would ask...

All he knew was that in a few hours time, men were sure to die and he would have to find his answers in the ruins left behind after the battle.

Chapter 915: A Dark Wind Approaches

Dozens of feet above the forest floor, a dark wind rustled branches and tugged at the trunks of mighty trees as it sped toward the edge of the wilderness overlooking Hanrahan town.

Within that dark wind, shadows seemed to bend and twist, taking on new monstrous shapes one moment and vanishing the next, leaving any who glimpsed them uncertain whether or not they'd seen anything at all.

When the wind reached the camp where Sybyll's army had spent the night, it paused, lingering in the swaying trees and listening to the threads of conversation that drifted through the air with campfire smoke.

"...hope that everyone makes it out okay. It's fine if they're hurt, but even Lady Heila can't heal death, and if too many people die..."

"...you hear that they took the bell from the watch tower? Lady Heila had the Tuscans rip it out to give to Dame Sybyll as a gift..."

"...just want to go back to the Vale and go back to helping in Master Georg's kitchens. I shouldn't have volunteered...."

In the darkness above the camp, nestled in the shadowy canopy of the tree branches, a bright white smile appeared for a moment before vanishing as quickly as it had come when the dark wind began to move again.

The dark wind gained speed as it followed the freshly churned and muddy snow that marked the passage of hundreds of soldiers, including Tuscan giants, only to slow again when it reached one of the watch towers built by the humans several decades ago.

Here, the air carried the sharp, metallic scent of blood mixed with the putrid stench of death, while a gaping hole near the top of the sturdy tower made it clear that not only had the human guardians of the tower lost their lives, but the shining heart of the tower itself had been ripped out, leaving behind only a hollowed out husk of stone and timber that could no longer provide warning to the humans about what was even now approaching their town.

This time, the bright white smile that appeared in the darkness was accompanied by a quiet chuckle and a soft swishing sound of unrestrained eagerness moments before the dark wind began to move again, leaving behind nothing but faint scratches high up on the branches of the trees to mark its passage.

By the time the sun slipped beneath the horizon, Heila, Hauke, and most of the army had moved several leagues away from where the army camped to gather at the edge of the wilderness overlooking the glittering jewel of Hanrahan Town, nestled next to a deep, dark lake that the first Baron of Hanrahan had named Gwennan's Jewel after his wife.

What the Eldritch once called the lake, even the shadowy figure cloaked in dark wind had forgotten many years ago, along with the name of the Eldritch village that had once stood nearby.

A fresh dusting of snow covered the valley, and though the lake was far too deep to freeze in a few days of harsh winter, many of the streams that fed it were covered in a layer of thick, treacherous ice.

The clouds that had blanketed the valley for several days, now wrung dry of what moisture they could offer to Hauke's sorcery, had drifted away as faint wisps, leaving the skies clear to bathe the snow-covered valley in the light of a waxing moon and countless stars and making it harder for the hidden, shadowy figures who had come with the dark wind to remain concealed within the forest canopy as they listened to the conversation taking place below.

"Your home is very pretty, Dame Sybyll," Heila said as she stood next to the armored vampire, gazing down at the city below.

"Only from this far off," the crimson-haired woman replied. "Up close, it's as dirty an' foul as any place, an' it reeks of rich men gettin' away wit' what no man should. Me mum said it were prettier when me father was Baron, but I never seen it when he lived."

"Ye found me a pretty gift ta' remember 'im by though," Sybyll said as she glanced over her shoulder where two towering Tuscan giants stood beside a freshly polished brass bell, taken from the watch tower that Captain Ultrech and his men had silenced.

"You should thank your cousin, Hugo, more than me," Heila said with a nod in the direction of the two human 'observers' who stood slightly apart from the rest of the army under Emmie's attentive eyes and her father's watchful presence. "I only looked at the bell because Captain Ultrech was worried that the inscription might be a form of the Church's sorcery. Hugo was the one who knew what made it special."

The inscription itself was only a few lines that read: 'This bell is a gift to my people. May it grow quiet in long years of peace and ring out loudly when demons threaten our realm. Baron Brighton Hanrahan.'

Just the fact that the words were attributed to Dame Sybyll's fallen father wasn't enough to make the bell special, but according to Hugo, who had studied the Hanrahan family records, the master of the foundry who cast the bells had invited Brighton Hanrahan to carve the inscription into the molds himself.

So the words on the side of the bell, cast in bronze, weren't just something Baron Hanrahan had said, but something that he had personally written that would last for generations to come. Once Heila understood that, she hadn't hesitated to have Ipiktok's men retrieve the bell and she'd even gone so far as to polish it while she waited for the sun to set, restoring its surface to the same gleaming beauty it possessed on the day it had first been hung.

"Are you going to ring the bell to celebrate your victory, Dame Sybyll?" Ipiktok asked from his position among the other captains who had gathered around their vampire commander. "My men won't mind carrying it to the fortress once we breach the walls," he offered.

"No, tha's not tha way of it," Sybyll said as a predatory smile formed on her lush, red lips, revealing her wickedly sharp fangs. "Father cast tha' bell ta' warn of 'demons' attacking me hometown. Only right ta' ring it ta' announce me homecoming."

"But tha' bell won't be enough," she added as she turned to look into the darkness of the wilderness above the army, staring upward into the branches of the towering trees that surrounded them. "An I invited a musician ta' play fer us if he'd stop lurkin' about in tha' trees ta come down an' say hello."

All around her, the various captains sprang into action, some drawing bows and pointing arrows toward the unseen presence in the trees while others drew weapons or hefted their shields as they formed a protective ring around Dame Sybyll. It was a pointless gesture, and many of the soldiers looked embarrassed when they realized that they had leaped out to 'defend' a woman who could destroy any Eldritch Lord they'd ever served and perhaps even some of the High Lords, but some reflexes were too deeply ingrained to suppress.

High above the soldiers of the army, a peal of warm laughter split the night as a dark shadow melted and twisted, detaching itself from the trunk of a tree and falling to the ground with only the faintest of rustling leaves to mark its descent before it landed lightly on the forest floor.

"You say 'lurking in the trees' as though it's a bad thing, my beautiful Crimson Dancer," a deep, rich, almost velvety voice said as the shadowy figure pulled back the hood of his dark cloak to reveal the a head covered in silky smooth black fur featuring the delicate, feline features of the Soft Paws clan and topped by a pair of tufted ears that caught every sound among the army that was louder than a whisper.

"Yer almost late ta' tha' party, Lord Jalal," Sybyll said as she strode past the wary captains who had raised their weapons again when the feline figure dropped to the ground less than a dozen paces from where they stood.

"But ye didn'a come alone, did ye?" Sybyll said as she reached out an armored hand to affectionately scritch the famed Eldritch Lord behind one of his tufted ears. "Where are tha men I asked ye' ta' bring fer tonight's dance?"

Chapter 916: An Invitation to Dance

"Where are tha men I asked ye' ta' bring fer tonight's dance?"

Hearing Dame Sybyll's question, the gathered captains exchanged confused and slightly worried glances. They had already formed their plans for the assault on the town and each person knew their role in the coming battle... but Dame Sybyll had called on Lord Jalal for reinforcements? And she hadn't told them?

"Patience, my darling dancer, patience," Jalal purred as he leaned into Sybyll's friendly, welcoming touch. The gesture might look intimate to outsiders who misunderstood, but to those who knew the Soft Paw Clan, seeing Dame Sybyll scritch the ears of Eldritch Lord of Airgead Mountain was a sign of just how much he trusted and relied on her, and a sign of her willingness to protect the feline lord and ensure his safety.

"It isn't easy to carry our drums so far from home," the Eldritch Lord continued when Sybyll withdrew her hand. "I rushed ahead to say hello and to make my own request," he said as he plucked at the laces that held his dark, shadowy cloak closed to reveal a gem-studded tunic beneath. "I wish to join the dance tonight, Dame Sybyll," he said with a twinkle in his dark eyes. "Will you let me spill blood with you and your... army?"

"Ye know I won't," Sybyll said tersely with a shake of her head. "I know tha' men ye want ta' hunt, an' I don't mind lettin' 'em loose in tha' wilderness wit' a blade fer ye or yer men ta' chase and dance wit' ta' yer heart's content," she added with a warning look. "But tonight, we only kill soldiers, an' tha' men ye' want dead aren't among 'em."

"Not soldiers?" Jalal spat. "They come with swords and spears, picks and axes. They wear armor and carry bows for hunting people. They invade our home every year to carry away as many stones as they can steal, and yet they aren't soldiers?"

The wealth of Airgead mountain was too tempting for some men to resist, and even without the cover of a war against the Eldritch, there were always men with more greed than sense who were willing to fund a venture into the wilderness to pillage what they could in smash-and-grab raids.

Most who were greedy enough and foolish enough to spend a night on the slopes of Airgead mountain died to Sybyll's ax before the sun rose, but not before they'd killed any members of Jalal's clan that they encountered and shoved their bags full of precious stones.

But for every five raiding parties that Sybyll crushed, at least one made it off the mountain, sometimes without even encountering Jalal's people, and their success was enough to ensure that more bands of raiders would try their luck again.

Baron Hanrahan might be too cowardly to call up his men to organize a real war against the nation of Airgead Mountain, but he supported enough of these raids to create a constant series of tragic losses and shattered families, leaving a festering, never-healing wound in Lord Jalal's heart that cried out for the soothing balm of vengeance.

"They aren't," Sybyll insisted. "Not tha' way that matters t'night. Thieves, robbers, brigands, raiders, call 'em what ye wish, but tonight, if they don't take ta tha' streets ta' fight then we let 'em live."

"Then at least let me come with you to kill a few 'soldiers,'" the Eldritch lord pleaded, stepping up close enough to Dame Sybyll to rub up against her as he whispered in her ear. "I'll guard your flank and leave you free to kill your kinsmen, but let me at least bathe my blades in blood tonight. I even dressed for the dance," he added as he stepped back and gestured to the gem-studded tunic he wore.

At a distance, the tunic caught and reflected enough of the pale light reflecting off the snow that it might be mistaken for armor. It was only when a person drew closer that they would realize that the entire tunic was covered in dark amethysts and sapphires, carefully placed in dark metal settings before being stitched in place like a tapestry of the night sky that caught the light and twinkled like stars in the dark.

Most striking of all, however, were the large diamonds, each the size of a cherry pit, that had been arranged in the pattern of a familiar constellation of stars.

"Ye promise ta' kill only soldiers who stand against us?" Sybyll asked, fixing the feline lord in place with a crimson stare so intense that his tail stopped twitching.

"If that's the price to be paid to join the dance and spill blood tonight, then that's a price I'll pay," Jalal said, refusing to back down from her stare. He'd danced with Dame Sybyll often enough to know that he wasn't her match.

She could have taken Airgead Mountain from him at any point she wanted, and none of his people would have protested so long as their duel was fought before witnesses, under the stars, and in full view of the people. She could have done it any number of times over the many years she had spent living among them, but she never had. Instead, she'd learned their ways and become almost as much a member of his own nation as she was a part of the Vale of Mists, though there was never any doubt about where her ultimate loyalties lay.

But just because she could defeat him didn't mean that Jalal was willing to set aside his dignity as the Eldritch Lord of Airgead Mountain. That was the real reason he'd told his men to advance slowly while he rushed ahead. He needed to have this conversation with Dame Sybyll before his men arrived because the shame of backing down to the powerful vampire in front of his people might cause him considerable problems in the days to come.

Jalal had ruled Airgead Mountain for several decades already but he knew that his dancing years were approaching their end. When the time came, he intended to summon the drummers for a whole season of dancing with bared blades until the next Lord of Airgead Mountain emerged from the bloody ritual of succession... but he wasn't ready yet and the last thing he wanted to see was a challenge that came on the heels of rumors about his weakness because he gave way to one of Nyrielle's progeny.

"Cousin Hugo," Sybyll called, looking over her shoulder and waving for the bastard son of her cousin, Ian Hanrahan, to join her. "Have ye' considered me offer? Will ye' stay at me side t'night and spill blood if it comes ta' that?"

"I've made up my mind about whose side I'm on," Hugo said as he walked forward to join his imposing cousin and the alternately fierce and playful Eldritch Lord. "But you know I'm not much good with a

sword. I don't want to get in your way," he said truthfully. He'd gotten better at fighting, or at least at taking a blow, in the months he spent receiving 'tutoring' from Sir Rain and Lord Owain, but he was still a long way from calling himself skilled enough to set foot on a battlefield.

"Good enough, if ye've made up yer mind," Sybyll said with an approving grin as she placed an armored hand on Hugo's shoulder. "Jalal, this is me cousin, Hugo. He's Ian Hanrahan's abandoned git an' the only family I won't kill t'night. If ye want ta' come dance wit' us, fine enough, but I don' need ye at me side."

"Give tha' lad a blade," she said, since any weapons Hugo had owned when he was captured were taken away from him and left behind in the Vale of Mists. "I know ye have a spare or two, so toss 'im one, an' keep him safe till we reach his father. Ye can kill anyone what tries ta' harm him or dumb enough ta' try ta kill you. Fair enough, kittin'?"

"Fair enough," Jalal said as his tail began to swish back and forth in obvious relief as he reached around his back to retrieve a curved knife that was as long as his forearm and shaped like a cat's hooked claw.

"You're in luck boy," the feline lord said as he presented the hilt of the blade to the boy. "We have a few minutes yet before my men arrive. Time enough for you to make an offering to the First Warrior and receive his guidance for the battle ahead. Come," he said as he turned toward a clearing not far from where the army had gathered. "Let me show you the way..."

Chapter 917: Things We Share (Part One)

"Lady Heila," Liam Dunn said hesitantly as he approached the diminutive witch, stepping carefully around a group of Glass Eyed archers who were distributing bundles of arrows from wooden crates they'd towed through the wilderness on improvised sleds. Emmie and her father Kurtz trailed close behind him, the young squire's eyes darting between the bustling preparations and the human she was supposed to be attending to.

Around them, the army had transformed into a complex dance of loosely organized chaos. A small group of bearish soldiers from the Vale of Mists unfurled the banners that had been carefully prepared for this battle before they ever left the Vale. While they worked, they seemed to treat each banner with the same kind of tenderness and reverence they would display toward the powerful person that each banner represented, never letting even a corner of the fabric touch the muddy, churned snow beneath their feet.

Meanwhile, Lightfoot scouts scurried between groups, acting as messengers relaying orders from the group of captains around Dame Sybyll now that they'd passed the time for scouring the wilderness and searching for signs of the enemy. And through it all, the acrid smell of pine pitch and woodsmoke filled

the air as dozens of torches were lit and passed from hand to hand, enveloping the forest in a flickering, reddish-orange glow and casting dark, flickering shadows across the snowy ground.

"Lady Heila, can you tell me what just happened?" Liam continued, raising his voice slightly over the sound of adjusting their armor and checking on their weapons. "What was all of that talk of dancing, and where is that man taking Hugo?"

It was getting easier, Liam realized, to refer to the Eldritch as people rather than demons, but he still had to watch his words carefully. The thorny aura that Heila radiated ever since she dressed for war made it even harder to mind his words, but he felt like he had no choice but to seek out the horned witch when his own 'guide', Emmie, didn't know anything more about the newcomer than he did.

"That man is named Jalal," Heila said with a considering look on her face as she stared in the direction where Jalal had taken Hugo. For a moment, she considered following him, if for no other reason than to satisfy a portion of the curiosity that had sat within her chest ever since Amahle had told her and Ashlynn about the Oracles and the remnants of their followers who were still scattered across the Eldritch world.

Deep down, both she and Ashlynn believed that the more they could learn about the ancient Oracles who had once walked Eldritch lands, the more they would understand about the powers at the Church who had usurped control of that power from the world. As tempting as it was, however, she knew better than to interfere in someone else's ritual, and her curiosity could wait until later. Instead, she turned her attention to Liam Dunn and her squire, explaining more for the latter's benefit than the former's.

"Jalal is the Eldritch Lord of Airgead Mountain, the one humans call the Cat Lord," Heila explained. "His clan has some things in common with your home in High Fen City, Emmie."

"Brave gladiators like your father fight in the arena to prove their strength in High Fen City," the diminutive witch added. "On Airgead Mountain, they 'dance with death under the stars.' It's just that they either have knives in their hands when they're 'dancing' or claws, and they fight until someone draws blood."

"Do they stop at first blood?" Emmie asked as her young mind filled with images of a mighty arena atop the mountain where feline gladiators fought under the shining stars of the night sky. "Or do they keep going until someone gives up? Or until someone dies?" Emmie asked excitedly with eyes that shone brightly like stars themselves.

"It depends on why they're dancing," Heila said, reaching out to ruffle her young squire's hair. Emmie had grown up in the shadow of the Arena, and she was always interested in stories of fights between champions. But Heila had brought her along to tonight's battle so that she could learn the difference between battles in the arena and the wars that the Vale of Mists and the people of Airgead Mountain had been fighting for more than a hundred years.

"Tonight, we're going to be fighting Ian Hanrahan, the man who murdered Dame Sybyll's mother and the son of the man who murdered her father to steal her home and her lands from her," Heila explained as her voice grew solemn. "Those same men have been trying to plunder Lord Jalal's home for as long as he's been alive. When he asked to join the dance tonight, he wanted to hunt down and kill the men who had been plundering his home."

Heila didn't look at Liam as she explained things in simple terms that a young girl like Emmie could understand, but she didn't have to. When she put it so plainly, it was impossible for Liam to ignore the similarities between what he had done to the Eldritch villagers near Dunn Barony and what had happened to Lord Jalal's people for the past century.

As he stood here in the middle of an army that was preparing to conquer not only Hanrahan Town but the whole of the barony, Heila was making it abundantly clear to Liam Dunn that he was exactly the same as the men they had come to kill.

The only difference was that Lady Ashlynn hoped to find a path to peace with the Dunns instead of crushing them... and the only reason they had that opportunity was because his family had never made an enemy like Sybyll Hanrahan.

"So why didn't Dame Sybyll want Lord Jalal to join the fight?" Emmie asked. "If his enemies are down there, shouldn't he be allowed to fight them?"

"He should be," Heila acknowledged. "But the men he wants to hunt and kill are cowards who are afraid to stand up in real battles. They attack farmers and miners, and people who turn chunks of rock into beautiful art so they can steal their valuables instead of restricting the fight to warriors who could threaten their lives. Instead of caring for the innocent among their defeated foes, they kill them and take their things. That's why Dame Sybyll called them thieves and brigands instead of soldiers or warriors."

One of the greatest lessons the Eldritch had to learn about humans was that humans never saw them as people. If humans could see the Eldritch as people, then they would understand that murdering a farmer to take his lands was wrong, just as it was wrong to slaughter a family to take their wealth.

Even humans knew better than to celebrate thieves and murderers. They made an example of those villains whenever they were caught so that everyone understood that there were some things that would never be tolerated. And yet, when the people humans were slaughtering were Eldritch, it didn't matter what kind of savagery they resorted to, they would be praised and worshiped as heroes.

It was a form of public adoration that Liam Dunn had known for most of his adult life, ever since he returned from the Duke's Academy in Keating Duchy and began to lead his father's men in battle against the Eldritch.

But Heila couldn't allow him to keep that image of himself as a hero if there was going to be any sort of reconciliation between their peoples. So when she spoke of the people who had attacked Airgead Mountain, she used the bluntest and least honorable terms she could think of to describe them, exactly as Dame Sybyll had done... and she was going to make certain that young Lord Liam Dunn received the message.

Chapter 918: Things We Share (Part Two)

The more she spoke, the more Liam's stomach sank. Her voice dripped with scorn and condemnation for the raiders who killed the common people among the Eldritch and her eyes burned with a fury that Heila herself had never known until she walked among the people of Ollie's village and heard first hand about what they'd lost as the Dunns constantly expanded their borders.

Heila knew that Ashlynn hoped to find a way to forge a peace between their peoples, and she knew that she was using Liam Dunn as a sort of test to see if they could convince any of the lords of the Lothian Court to submit to Eldritch rule instead of resisting to the bitter end.

Thankfully, many of those villagers had heeded Ollie's warnings and fled instead of fighting back this summer, otherwise they might have demanded the young lord's head for his crimes. But there were still years upon years cruel, merciless attacks and senseless slaughter that were fresh in the minds of the newest residents of the Vale of Mists, and Heila's healer's heart ached when she heard their stories.

"Lord Liam," Heila said, startling the young lord when she finally turned to look at him, addressing him directly for the first time since he had asked his question. "You understand, don't you? Why Lord Jalal wants to join the fight, and how hard we're all working to limit the violence? He's one of Dame Sybyll's

closest friends and she's still holding him back because Lady Ashlynn doesn't want this to turn into a massacre."

Her hands tightened into fists as she spoke and she struggled to keep her voice smooth and even. One of the reasons she'd focused so much on concocting potions the past few days had been to have an excuse to avoid spending time with the murderous human.

She'd been tremendously grateful to Emmie for taking up the burden of watching over him while she worked, but now, she had to do her part in bringing about the peace Ashlynn wanted, no matter how much she wanted to lash out at Liam with her whip instead of just sharp words.

All around them, soldiers were forming up into organized ranks, checking their weapons one last time or clutching at lucky totems as they awaited the order to march. Yet the area around Heila, Liam, Emmie and Kurtz had grown utterly still without so much as a field mouse daring to approach the prickly aura that radiated from the diminutive witch.

"Lord Liam," Heila said slowly after taking a deep, calming breath. "Did you see the pattern of jewels on Lord Jalal's tunic? Did you recognize it?" she asked.

"I, I did," Liam said carefully as he realized that seeking out Lady Heila on the eve of battle to satisfy his curiosity might not have been a good idea, no matter how worried he was about the pagan deity that Hugo was being taken away to make an offering to.

"It's one of the Thirteen Sacred Constellations, Gareon, the Ascended Swordsman," Liam said, though he imagined that any child in the Kingdom of Gaal over the age of ten could have answered the same unless they'd never set foot in a temple or been taught the stars by their parents. "Is it a trophy that Lord Jalal is wearing? A piece of sacred art that he's turned into a tunic? It must have cost a fortune to make from so many gemstones..."

"Of course it's not a trophy!" Heila snapped loud enough to startle the group of captains that stood nearby, prompting several of them to move an extra dozen paces away or more as they felt the faintest brush of her prickly aura against their skin, even from nearly thirty paces away.

Only Sybyll seemed unperturbed, standing resolute in her crimson darksteel armor as she waited for the rest of Lord Jalal's men to arrive. Of course, her hearing was keen enough to hear every word of Heila's

conversation, but the young witch seemed to have things well in hand and she saw no reason to interfere when Liam Dunn's affairs had little to do with her. Lady Ashlynn could make him whatever offers she wished, as long as they didn't involve Hanrahan Barony or Airgead Mountain, she had little to say about any of it.

"That's the art of the Soft Paw Clan," Heila said as she fought to reign in her desire to whip the arrogant human. "Those are the gemstones of Airgead Mountain and that's what Lord Jalal's people do with them, or at least one of the things they do with them. They don't need to steal from humans to create beautiful things!"

She'd encountered a similar sort of attitude from Lord Hugo and Sir Carwyn when she helped escort them around the growing city outside of Lady Nyrielle's ancient fortress. At first, the men had asked if the Eldritch had learned their construction techniques from humans until Master Isabell pointed out that some of the techniques the Eldritch were using were more sophisticated than the ones used in human cities, even in the old countries.

But as much as Heila hated hearing Hugo and Carwyn making assumptions that the Eldritch had to learn from humans in order to do great things, they'd amended their attitudes quickly and they'd never once suggested that the beautiful paintings or tapestries on display in the ancient fortress were stolen.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" Liam said, quickly dropping to one knee and raising his hand in submission as he felt the sting of sweat mixing with dozens of fresh pin-prick size wounds all across his chest when her anger became a palpable force.

"I, I didn't mean to offend. It's just, I was just surprised to see a sacred symbol of the Church on the chest of a de-, er, on Lord Jalal's tunic," he explained in a rush, stumbling over his words and revealing that deep down, there was at least a part of him that still thought of the Eldritch as 'demons' even after everything he'd seen.

"A symbol of the Church?" Heila snorted derisively. "Lord Liam, that isn't a sacred symbol of your Church," she said before pausing before correcting herself in a tone that lost its heat and gained a trace of embarrassment as she thought of how Ignatious would react to her statement.

"At least, it's not just a sacred symbol of your Church," Heila amended. "There are countless stars in the sky and any number of minor constellations, but would you believe me if I told you that the ones you refer to as the Thirteen Sacred Constellations are recognized by the Eldritch people as well? And they have been for a long time, well before your people ever came to our shores."

"The constellation that your people call Gareon, the Ascended Swordsman is the one we call 'The First Warrior,'" Heila explained. "And it's the symbol Lord Jalal wears to dance with death."

Chapter 919: Under The Same Stars

The small group of people gathered around Heila all had different reactions to learning that Humans and the Eldritch revered the same legendary figure in the skies above. Even now, early in the night, the five bright stars that made up the 'sword' of the constellation could be seen peeking above the horizon, and as the night wore on, the entire figure would become visible.

To Emmie, it was just common sense. Everyone knew the First Warrior, and it was such a popular sign of a warrior's strength that she'd seen at least a dozen gladiators painting versions of the constellation on their shields before important fights in the arena.

Instead of any great shock, she wondered just how great a warrior someone must have been for the humans to attach their name to the First Warrior in the skies, and behind that thought, she wondered if the human she had been attending to would be able to tell her stories of that Champion.

To Kurtz, the feeling was different. He'd slowly begun to integrate into the community of the Horned Clan in the Vale of Mists, rediscovering the 'home' that his ancestors had lost when they fled from Cellach Lothian's army that burned much of the Vale to the ground.

Now, when he heard that the human Church had named the First Warrior after one of their own people, calling it an 'Ascended Swordsman' as if some human Champion had earned a place among the stars, his blood began to simmer and his chest felt hollow, as if the humans were stealing something sacred that had belonged to him and every other Champion who chased after the strength to triumph over their foes.

For Liam, it was disquieting in a different way. He had never considered himself a devout man and for years, the most important thing about the constellation had been that the Ascended Swordsman's blade pointed toward the south. It was an easily recognizable constellation and one that helped him to orient himself in the wilderness on countless occasions.

It was more useful than sacred, and he wasn't the sort of person who wore a pendant dedicated to one of the Thirteen Sacred Constellations or said prayers in the name of some long-dead saint in order to get

through the struggles of life. He'd met many such people among the common folk over the years, and he always looked down on them for turning to the divine instead of taking control of their own lives the way he had when he started carving out new lands to add to the Dunn Barony.

What he found disquieting, however, was the fact that the constellations the Eldritch recognized matched up exactly with the ones the Church taught in every temple and village across the kingdom and likely on the other side of the seas as well.

Constellations were just groups of brighter stars that men had drawn lines between, but if you gave a small child a piece of charcoal and told them to make figures out of a bunch of dots on the paper, ten different children would produce at least five different drawings. At some point, the Great Prophet had been the one to draw up the map of the heavens and name the Thirteen Sacred Constellations. But if he had drawn them differently, or if someone else had drawn them and they were different, it likely wouldn't have changed anything about the stories the Church told about the 'Ascended' ones who watched over mankind from above during the night while the Holy Lord of Light completed his journey around the world.

But if Lady Heila was really telling the truth, and they were all the same, then that must mean that these were more than just stories meant to guide impressionable fools into living 'godly' lives...

"Lady Heila," Liam said as he swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat. "What kind of stories do your people tell about the 'First Warrior'? And do you, do you worship him, or...?"

He couldn't bring himself to ask the question that was slowly building within his mind, but he was starting to wonder if the reason the Church hated demons so much wasn't because they were 'evil' but was because they were heretics who would spread different ways of worshiping the same holy figures and undermining the Church's power as the 'true representative of the Holy Lord of Light.'

After all, there had been schisms within the Church before, but none had ever survived the response from the Saints and their Exemplars. But if the war against the Eldritch was just more of the same strife...

"We don't worship the way you do," Heila said bluntly, interrupting Liam's rapidly spiralling thoughts. "But we do pass down tales from the times of old. They're different everywhere you go," she added. "But most will tell you that the First Warrior reminds warriors what strength is for. It's said that the First Warrior brought the tradition of challenges to the Eldritch people in order to prevent the few who

survived the Age of Ice from falling into endless wars when the age ended and people scrambled to claim territory for their people."

"There are dozens of stories, and hundreds of variations on them, and I haven't even started to learn them all," Heila admitted. "But if you compare them to the stories about Gareon, the Ascended Swordsman, some of them aren't that different. Gareon was the First Knight, wasn't he? The one who said that the greatest warriors must be the most virtuous? To this day, knights choose five virtues after the five stars of his sword, don't they?"

"You... you know a great deal about our sacred stars," Liam said, genuinely impressed that the diminutive witch would take the time to study such obscure scripture. Liam had seen priests dedicated to reading the patterns in the sky and seeing the future in the stars, but only when he left the frontier.

In places like Lothian March, the Church focused so much on the power of Holy Light to banish the darkness and the strength of Holy Flames to burn away evil that few people paid any attention to the scriptures about the stars, or the orders within the Church that dedicated their life to them.

"The man who's courting me is an Inquisitor," Heila said, folding her arms over her petite bust and turning up her nose at Liam in a huff. "Ignatious's faith is important to him so of course I talk to him about it."

"But, but you're a witch," Liam stammered, staring in open-mouthed shock while his world felt like it was twisting sideways or turning inside out as a witch all but quoted scripture at him and now claimed that she was being courted by an Inquisitor?!

"How could an Inquisitor... Inquisitor Ignatious," he said as he tried to remember why the name sounded so familiar, but no matter what he thought, he couldn't put together the idea of any Inquisitor courting an Eldritch witch.

"You don't understand what the Inquisition is supposed to be about," Heila said, pointing at the young lord and speaking sternly, as though she had transformed from a witch into some kind of Holy Sister.

"Ignatious says that an Inquisitor should search for truth in all things and find the good in the world in order to protect it," she said. "He also says that the Inquisition should discover wickedness wherever it hides and destroy it. The only problem is that somewhere along the way, your stupid Church decided

that anyone who wasn't human was wicked and had to be destroyed, and any truth that was inconvenient or disagreed with what they already thought had to be a lie."

"Lord Liam," Heila stood as she saw the feline figure of Lord Jalal returning with a much calmer and more confident-looking Hugo Hanrahan. "The point is that the First Warrior and your Ascendant Swordsmen aren't all that different. So if you're worried that your friend has been taken off to make an offering to a heretical Eldritch deity... Then just tell yourself that he was praying to Gareon for guidance instead."

"And if you still have questions," she said over her shoulder as she left the stupefied-looking young lord behind. "Then I'll introduce you to Ignatious when this is all over," she said before releasing a slow sigh of relief to be away from the human nobleman.

"Maybe he'll have an easier time being kind to you," she added under her breath. "I'm sorry, Mother Ashlynn," she whispered. "But for now, this is as much as I can do..."

There was more that she could have explained to put the young lord's mind at ease. She could have told him that, at most, Lord Jalal and the people of his clan used the images of the constellations as visual anchors for their sorcery, simple aids in managing the complex concepts of strength in battle or courage, or whatever else they were invoking when they sought strength from the stars.

Lord Jalal wasn't an Oracle. There had been no true Oracle of the Stars since the Human Church found a way to bind that power to the chosen successors of their 'Great Prophet.' At most, Lord Jalal's people were following traditions that had existed before the founding of the Church of the Holy Lord of Light.

But explaining all that, and confronting Liam's reaction to the secrets that Amahle had revealed to Heila and Ashlynn during their training, was more than Heila could do in the limited time that she had, and she wasn't entirely convinced that it would have been a good idea anyway.

She had planted a seed for Liam by telling him about the First Warrior and the Ascended Swordsman... he would have to come looking for answers if he wanted to learn more, and when he did, he needed to demonstrate that he could accept whatever truths he found.

Chapter 920: Playing The Music Of War

While Heila answered Liam's questions and Lord Jalal prepared his human charge to protect himself, twenty members of the Soft Paw clan quietly made their way through the branches above, using them like roads until they reached the head of the army and descended to the forest floor.

Each man wore a dark cloak, similar to Lord Jalal's but where the tunic he wore beneath the cloak was covered with gemstones, these men wore only a handful of diamonds, arranged in a neat pattern over their hearts to resemble a curled horn that the Eldritch would call The Trumpet of Dawn, after the constellation that appeared just before sunrise during the long days of summer.

On their backs, each man carried a large, double-flared drum the size of a keg of ale, along with a small wooden frame to set the drum on while it was played.

"I thought ye' would'a brought tha' big drums," Dame Sybyll said when the men began to carefully inspect their drums, gently tapping each drumhead to ensure that it was still tight after being carried so far from home and that the drum itself was still sound after enduring the bitter cold of the weather Hauke had conjured.

"You must be joking!" Lord Jalal said with a rich, rolling laugh. "There are no giants in my nation who could carry the larger drums here. We could build one for you, but we would have had to come weeks ago, and you didn't give me much time to prepare even this much for our dance tonight."

"Don't worry," he added with a smile when he saw the frown forming on Dame Sybyll's face. "Each man is an experienced Stargazer. The sounds of their drums will fill the valley, and they won't have to step more than a dozen paces beyond the treeline in order to do it."

To some, developing sorcery that served no purpose other than enhancing a musician's performance would doubtless be seen as a waste of power and potential, but Lord Jalal's people were different. They lived for art, music, and dance, and they poured every last bit of themselves into their expressions of joy, sorrow, and fury. To them, it was only natural that their sorcery would follow the shapes and sounds of the passions that gave their lives meaning.

"So long as ye strike terror in tha' hearts o' tha' enemy an' help ta' break their will ta' fight, I'll be content," Sybyll said with an uncharacteristically tight set to her lush crimson lips. Now that this moment was finally upon her, she found that not only had her rage grown hotter than it had been in several years, but there was a part of her that hoped the common soldiers of Ian Hanrahan's army would simply throw down their arms and surrender so she didn't have to tear men away from their wives and children just to take the head of the coward who had murdered her mother.

Part of her wanted to spill blood until the snow was stained red with it, while another part hoped that the butcher's bill tonight wouldn't be too high for either side. For years, she could hold those separate desires apart as time wore away at the intensity of each of them. Ever since meeting Lady Ashlynn, however, and even more so after receiving the gift that Mistress Nyrielle referred to as 'Heart's Reawakening,' it was becoming harder and harder to navigate the space between the two conflicting desires.

Her hand trembled slightly as she took hold of her ax until she clenched it firmly enough to deform any metal weaker than the darksteel of her prized weapon while she walked to the head of the army.

The stars shone high overhead and the snow on the ground reflected the pale light of the waxing moon, but Dame Sybyll didn't want Ian Hanrahan to underestimate the force arrayed against him, and so every soldier also carried a thick torch that filled the forest with a flickering, reddish-orange glow that made the entire army seem even more menacing than they already were.

Silence slowly swept over the gathered soldiers as she took her place before them, standing on a wooden crate as she surveyed the army. The remnants of the Black Wolf Brigade's Golden Eyed skirmishers still made up more than half of the army with more than a hundred soldiers.

The additions of nearly fifty heavy infantry of the Iron Tusk Clan, more than sixty of the elite and deadly accurate archers of the Glass Eyed Clan, along with the crushing power of ten Tuscan Giants and the swift, nearly traceless scouting of the Lightfoot clan had turned the Second Army into a true force of elites, ready to topple anything that stood in their way and grind it beneath their feet.

They weren't Sybyll's army, not really. When this all ended, they would return to Commander Savis and Lady Ashlynn for the next phase of the war. But for the moment, they felt strong enough to do what needed to be done and reliable enough that she could depend on them.

"Winter nights may be long," she began, speaking loud enough to be heard by the entire army even if her voice didn't extend beyond the trees. "But we've already squandered a bit 'o this one an' I won't waste much o' yer time."

"Ye don'a know these men, an' tha's a good thing. If ye knew these men tha' way I do, ye'd hate them as much as I do, or more," she said, clenching her fist as her eyes began to smolder with deeply held hatred. "I've come ta' claim me vengeance 'gainst Ian Hanrahan, but fer tha' rest 'o ye, this is jus' a job."

"This town, it may be dirty an' filthy in places," Sybyll continued as her voice softened slightly. "But it's mine, an' the common folk there are my people. I don'a want ta' see 'em harmed. I won't sit a'top a throne o' blood an' bone ta' rule o'er ashes."

Several soldiers nodded silently at her words while others placed clawed hands over their hearts. They might not know these humans, and none of them held any hatred in their hearts for Ian Hanrahan or his sycophants, but all of them could understand the pull of home.

A few of them, people Nyrielle had gathered after failed rebellions, like Captain Ultrech's heavy infantry, even knew what it felt like to see your world turn upside down when a new lord seized power and tried to tear out the old order, root and branch. They would fight against a Lord's forces, but they would never destroy their own homes.

"T'night, we use every weapon we have ta break our foes," Sybyll said as she hopped off the wooden crate and walked over to the place where two of Captain Ipiktok's Tuscan giants held the gleaming bell from the fallen watch tower. "We start wit' fear, an' we let them know we're commin' 'cause even if they know, they can'a hope ta' win. So let them prepare an' make ready every soldier and strategy they have... an' let 'em learn it's useless!"

With a powerful swing, Sybyll struck the bell with a balled-up fist, unleashing a resounding sound that echoed far beyond the forest, sweeping across the valley, and the whole of Hanrahan Town within it. The sound of Brighton Hanrahan's bell was clear, pure, and unmistakable to the people it was meant to warn of impending danger.

-GOOOOOOONNNNNNGGGG-

"T'night, we fight! T'night, we take back me home! T'night, Ian Hanrahan will die!"

All around her, the soldiers of the Second Army raised their torches or weapons high, shouting with an echo of her fury and their desire to trample her foes beneath their boots. They might not be 'her army', but there wasn't a soldier among them who didn't respect Dame Sybyll's strength or her desire to reclaim what was hers... and tonight, they would spill the blood of anyone foolish enough to stand in the way of her vengeance.

-HAAAAAARRRRUUUUUUMMMM-

The sound of Ipiktok's men raising their long, flexible trunks in unison and letting out a deep, rolling trumpet blast filled the air, drowning out the sound of the warning bell and replacing it with a much darker sound that would freeze the hearts of any who heard it.

-BOOM BOOM- -BOOM BOOM- -BOOM- -CLACK- BOOM- -CLACK- -BOOM-

Finally, twenty drummers of Lord Jalal's Soft Paw Clan filled the night with a deep, somber march of doom, setting the steady beat for hundreds of soldiers to begin to move, spilling out of the wilderness in neat, orderly ranks as they advanced on Hanrahan Town.

And at the head of the armor marched a lone figure in crimson armor who was finally, after many long years in exile, coming home.