

# The Vampire 971

## Chapter 971: Sybyll's Story (Part One)

By the time the final members of Dame Sybyll's impromptu court were seated, everyone in the hall realized that something even more unprecedented than the fall of a single town was happening here.

An Inquisitor sitting next to a Witch, whispering to each other as if they were finding common ground. The heir to the Dunn Barony sat next to the one-armed Demon Lord of Airgead Mountain, not just civilly, but offering to pour wine for the Cat Lord and performing the etiquette of the most junior lord present.

By the time Lord Hugo ascended the dais, the people were sitting on the edges of their seats, paying attention to every single word and gesture as though it might hold a clue to their fates.

"You heard?" Roseen whispered to Cossot as the two women stood beside the dais, awaiting any instructions Dame Sybyll might have for them. "They called him 'Sir Hugo', not 'Lord Hugo.' Why would they do that if Dame Sybyll was still going to embrace him and call him 'cousin'?"

"I told you, Roseen," Cossot whispered in an exasperated tone. "You should have paid more attention during etiquette lessons. Remember what Dame Sybyll called Ian Hanrahan at the start of the night, when she challenged him from outside the city?"

Cossot had already put the pieces together hours ago, which was why she didn't refer to Ian Hanrahan as 'Baron' anywhere that Dame Sybyll could hear, but it seemed like her friend was dangerously slow in doing the same.

"She called him a murderer, didn't she?" Roseen said with a puzzled frown. "She accused him of murdering Baroness Caitlin."

"Before that," Cossot sighed. "She called him the son of a usurper. She's saying that Aiden Hanrahan should never have been Baron, which means Ian's claim to the throne isn't legitimate at all, which is why Hugo can't be a 'Lord.'"

"But she still called him 'Sir' Hugo, didn't she?" Roseen asked. "If he can't be a lord..."

"He's still a knight," Cossot said, looking at the graceful, alluring figure of the woman sitting on the throne as though she was beginning to understand a small piece of the woman who had taken a hapless young nobody into her service.

"Dame Sybyll was very, very insistent about being addressed as 'Dame' because she's a knight... and I think she really means it," Cossot said as a seed of admiration began to sprout within her heart. "She's not a knight like Bastian, who was only knighted because he was a lord's son. She's a knight in the old way. I bet she stood vigil and swore the oaths and everything..."

Sitting on her gilded throne, Sybyll smiled at the brave young girl she'd kept running all night long. No matter how quiet the two young women were, it was impossible for their words to escape her sensitive ears, but what she heard raised her estimation of young Cossot even further. Now, however, all of the pieces were in place, and it was time to move the evening along.

"I have a story ta' tell," Sybyll said, speaking loudly enough to be heard all the way at the back of the crowded hall and over the low hum of whispers and murmurs that sprang up after she'd embraced her cousin Hugo. "It starts years ago, on tha' knight me father was drunk wit' joy to learn his lady love were finally wit' child..."

The story she told was one that Hugo had heard before, about Aiden Hanrahan's treachery and his fear that Baroness Caitlin would give birth to an heir who would inherit the throne in place of Aiden's son Ian. And even if Brighton Hanrahan's child had turned out to be a girl, it was still proof that Caitlin wasn't barren... she might still bear another child.

It was a story that sounded all too familiar to Inquisitor Diarmuid. A murder over jealousy and the desire for the throne. Quickly arranged cremation to prevent the spread of the 'illness' that claimed the life of a loving husband, wife, and their unborn child.

All that was missing was a 'clever' attempt to blame the whole thing on demons to resemble half a dozen of the cases Diarmuid had investigated in his long career. Only, Aiden Hanrahan was clever enough to avoid such an obvious lie because he must have realized that blaming the death of his brother's family on demons would only invite more scrutiny. Better, in the end, to let people believe it was a cruel disease than the cruelty of demons.

Sybyll's story was a familiar one, but it diverged sharply from the usual script when she spoke of her mother's harrowing escape.

"I'm a strong woman," Sybyll said, clenching her fist for emphasis as she told her tale. "But I've nowhere near tha' strength me mother had. I carry an axe that weighs as much as five men, but me mother, she carried me in her belly, wit' a broken leg an' battered body."

"I'm a strong woman," the Crimson Knight repeated. "But me mother were stronger than anyone I know. She carried me away, all tha' way ta Aleese Barony an' I were born in a village there."

When Sybyll had spoken of her father's murder, her voice was bitter and sharp, tinged with a sense of longing for the parent she'd only known in the stories her mother shared with her as a child. She hated Aiden Hanrahan for taking her father from her, but Aiden was long dead and buried, and she was never able to avenge her father's murder. So when she spoke of him, her voice held bitterness... but it held very little pain.

When she spoke of her mother, however, it was much, much harder to keep her voice calm and steady. The aura of strength and invincibility that surrounded the Crimson Knight fell away bit by bit, leaving behind a young woman who had watched her only parent suffering far too much for far too long.

"Those early years were hard," Sybyll said after collecting herself. "Aiden hunted us like foxes wit' his knights an' hounds. Each spring, mother packed me up an' fled ta another village. What couldn't come wit' us in a hand cart, she left behind. Her leg were crippled an' just walkin from Ribsti ta' Horl took three days or four instead o' two, but she always kept us two steps ahead."

In the rows of benches, Madam Cordelia's eyes grew too misty to see as she imagined her beloved Baroness Caitlin reduced to nothing more than a beggar with a hand cart, carrying her child from village to village. In her mind's eye, she imagined the beautiful, elegant woman in the oil painting growing gaunt and thin, doubtlessly saving what scraps of food she had for the daughter she'd risked everything to save.

The pain alone of walking so far with a crippled leg must have been agonizing, and with Baron Aiden's men hunting her, she must have lived in constant fear of the day she and her daughter were finally captured.

Dame Sybyll said those years were 'hard' but 'hard didn't begin to describe what Baroness Caitlin had suffered... and strong felt like far too feeble a word to describe the woman who endured it all, just to give her daughter a chance at life.

#### Chapter 972: Sybyll's Story (Part Two)

The more Sybyll spoke, the more the people in the great hall found themselves drawn into her story. There wasn't any sorcery to it, nor any vampire gifts. Rather, it was the most human part of her that was on display, and almost everyone in the room found something about her tale to be deeply moving.

Not everyone, however, was able to put aside the recent hurts or the horrors they'd seen during the battle at the west gate plaza, and Sir Thorryn struggled to see the crimson-haired woman sitting atop the gilded throne as anything other than the demon knight who had cut down templars with her giant axe as though she were felling trees in the wilderness.

"Don't get too caught up in her words, Drema," the veteran knight said when he saw tears gathering in the corner of his daughter's eyes. "Demons are cunning, ruthless, and vile. She looks soft and tender now, but she was covered in blood just hours ago. She would have killed me if I'd been in her way," he reminded his daughter with a squeeze on her shoulder, hoping she understood how dangerous this 'Dame Sybyll' really was.

"But she didn't want to fight, did she?" Drema countered, blotting away tears and turning to look at her father with large, questioning eyes. "Didn't she ask everyone to surrender? Before the fight, didn't she just want to face Baron Hanrahan?"

"And what did she do when she didn't get what she wanted?" Thorryn countered. "People died, pumpkin. No matter what she says, you have to remember that."

"I'll remember, Papa," the knight's daughter promised solemnly as she turned to look back at the woman on the throne. But when she looked at Dame Sybyll and watched the tears glistening in the corners of her eyes, she couldn't help but wonder whose fault it really was that people had died tonight.

After all, her father hadn't been the only one to see the Crimson Knight in her blood-splattered armor during the height of the battle. Drema had been in the great hall when Sybyll shattered the door and tossed aside the barricade like the heavy tables were nothing but kindling.

But she hadn't made a single move to hurt the people in the great hall. Not one. From the moment she entered, she'd only cared about finding her cousin, the Baron Ian Hanrahan. As soon as she knew where he was, she left without a single drop of blood spilled. Her father said that she was a demon, and that demons were ruthless, cunning and vile... but from where Drema sat in the great hall, it didn't seem that way at all.

"By tha' time I were old enough ta' help, we'd washed up in Leufroy Barony," Sybyll said, gazing at the portrait of her mother as she continued her tale. "I weren't tha' best daughter ta' me mother. She said she'd been friends wit' Baroness Hatilda. I tried ta' reach tha' keep, thinking I'd be helpful ta' me mother an' get help from her friend..."

"I never made it 'crossed tha castle moat," she said bitterly, clenching her fist as genuine anger crept into her voice. "Tha' guards roughed me up, an' when I ran back ta' me mother, they followed to rough her up too. What they took from us..." she said as her voice broke and her fist slammed into the armrest of the throne hard enough to crack and splinter the wood.

Sybyll had never forgotten those men's faces. It had taken her years to return to Leufroy Barony, and by then her mother was long lost to her. But even without Mistress Nyrielle's gifts, Sybyll had learned to use her body as a weapon. In the seediest of brothels, she learned how to tempt men into her welcoming embrace where they were the most vulnerable, and then she drowned her hatred in the hot blood that spilled across her body when she slid her knife between their ribs or slit their throats.

"We did it alone, an' we did it t'gether," Sybyll said, shaking off the memories of men long dead as she poured out her grievances in her father's great hall, speaking as much to him and her mother as she was to the assembled people of Hanrahan Town. "No knight or lord would help us. No friend or kin would recognize us. But I had the strongest mother in all tha' world by me side, an' we... we never let tha' world beat us."

By now, there wasn't a woman in the hall who wasn't clutching at a handkerchief or clinging to a loved one as they imagined what Baroness Caitlin and her daughter had gone through. To the side of the dias, Cossot and Roseen held each other's hands and stared at Dame Sybyll with eyes that not only glistened with tears but also swam with admiration and sympathy.

Silently, both young women wondered if their own mothers would have had the strength or the skill to take an infant and flee all the way across Lothian March, evading pursuit and caring for their child. Both of them came from wealthy, privileged homes, and their mothers could be called capable in the sense that they managed their household servants well and kept the children in order, but... to strip away everything they had and leave them to provide for a child by themselves? Impossible.

On the dais, Diarmuid scowled as he listened to Dame Sybyll spinning her tale. Everything she said, the horrors she'd seen, the struggles she'd faced... all of it sounded plausible. There was nothing unbelievably grand, nor unbelievably cruel, about what she'd suffered.

After all of the things Diarmuid had seen, the story she told was far too believable. But there was something about that very believability that gnawed at his mind. Something that the Inquisitor in him couldn't help but doubt, even as the man in him wanted to reach out to offer comfort and whatever solace prayer could provide to the wounded woman.

It was a position he never expected to find himself in, and now that he was here, face to face with a demon he felt had suffered too much, he couldn't help but look at the witch sitting beside him and wonder... was this the test that she expected him to face?

#### Chapter 973: Sybyll's Story (Part Three)

"You don't believe her?" Heila asked quietly from beside the Inquisitor. "You should know prayers to help you discern the truth if you have doubts," she suggested lightly.

"I do... but I won't use them now," the Inquisitor said, frowning as he continued to turn over the demon's words, trying to find the fault in them. He preferred to use his mind and the evidence he could inspect with his own senses to discern the truth instead of relying on guidance and inspiration from the Holy Lord of Light. After all, the Lord above had given man a mind for a reason, and it wasn't so that His servants could turn to him for answers whenever they had doubts.

Besides, even if he prayed for revelation, he wasn't sure that he could impose the Holy Lord of Light's will on Dame Sybyll, forcing her to tell the truth, without injuring her in the process. She might see it as an act of aggression that would trigger even more bloodshed, and Diarmuid refused to be the reason that their fragile truce was broken.

"She remembers all of this so clearly," Diarmuid said as he finally realized what was bothering him about Sybyll's story. "I, I feel like her pain and sorrow, anger and grief, they all resemble true feelings. If she told me this all happened yesterday, I wouldn't doubt her words... but this was all more than twenty years ago," he said softly. The rest, he left unsaid. After all, he was sitting just a few feet away from the powerful demon. If he said that she sounded rehearsed, he wasn't certain he would survive making the accusation.

"You need to learn more about vampires, Inquisitor Diarmuid," Heila said with a knowing look in her eyes. "Dame Sybyll doesn't dream anymore. She can't. None of her kind can," she said, though she had heard from Ashlynn that things weren't entirely like that for Nyrielle anymore.

"Every day, she relives her past," Heila explained. "Vampires remember things clearly because they relive them over and over and over again. If they have pleasant memories, then it's probably a wonderful thing. But for Dame Sybyll..." she said, allowing her voice to trail off so the Inquisitor could fill in the rest for himself.

"Merciful Light," he whispered as his eyes grew wide in horror. "You mean, the things she lived through... she has to live through them again and again and again each day when the sun rises?" The thought of it was enough to send shivers down his spine, and when he looked back at Sybyll, his expression was filled with more worry than scrutiny. If this was the struggle given to a person who became a vampire... wasn't it still too cruel?

Dame Sybyll had clearly overheard his whispered conversation with Heila, but she didn't address him directly when she resumed her tale. Still, her next words made it clear that the secret Heila had revealed was every bit as agonizing for her as he'd feared, if not worse.

"Tha' life we lived, it weren't one I'd wish on tha' man I hate tha' most in this world," Sybyll said as she turned to lock gazes with Ian Hanrahan for the first time since she'd entered the great hall. Her crimson eyes were puffy and faintly pinkish tears spilled freely from them but she didn't seem to care as she directed her fury at the bound and chained lord.

"Fourteen years, we ran, an' we hid an' we lived like kicked an' beaten dogs," Sybyll spat fiercely enough that Ian staggered backwards and nearly tripped over his own chains. "Fourteen years b'fore we heard tha' usurper Aiden died an' Cousin Ian took his place. Fourteen years, that broke me mother's body and spirit... but she never forgot who she was, an' she never turned her back on me."

"So when she thought that finally," Sybyll said as her body shook with barely contained fury. "Finally, we could come home an' reconcile wit' me cousin. When we were no threat ta him or his place on tha' throne. When he had no reason ta' hate us or hurt us..."

By the time they're returned to the place that should have been Sybyll's ancestral home, her mother was no longer recognizable, even to the people who knew her best. Those years wore away at her until her lustrous red hair was thin and faded, her pale, milky skin had grown tan and blotchy, and her once radiant smile was cracked and broken.

There was no trace of grace or pride in the bearing of the crippled woman who brought her daughter to visit the keep on a feast day, but even if the years stripped away every external trace of the woman she had once been, her mind remained as keen as ever. They'd saved up every snip and silver penny they could, and spent nearly all that they had to dress themselves up neatly, blending in with the other prominent common folk until Caitlin found the opportunity she'd been looking for.

She'd led Sybyll into the passages known only to the most trusted of servants and the Hanrahan family themselves, leading her to a place that they could wait for the young Baron Ian Hanrahan once the public feast came to an end.

"It's been a long time, Cousin," Sybyll said, addressing Ian Hanrahan directly at last. "Ye were still a young man, tha' night we met. I still remember tha' lecherous look in yer' eyes when ye' thought me mother had brought me to ye as entertainment fer tha' evening," she said in a voice that dripped with venom and scorn.

"You should have taken the offer," Ian said, refusing to stand idly by and allow the demon woman to continue controlling the narrative now that she had brought matters around to him directly. "If you'd have gone along with it, that old hag might have survived the night and you wouldn't have been chased out of town."

"You tell a fine tale of misery and woe," the shackled baron continued as he drew himself up to his full height. "But everyone who knew my aunt Caitlin knew that she was barren. You show up, looking a bit like her, with a mad cripple raving about my father murdering yours, then offering to 'make amends' and keep matters secret," he roared, shouting to be heard by every person in the hall.

"You're a demon! You were a liar and a swindler then, and you're a demon trickster now," Ian shouted. "You can conquer my home with your army. You can drag me here in chains," he said as he rattled his chains for emphasis. "But you can never convince the good and godly people of Hanrahan that you belong on that throne," he declared, as though he could make his statement true through sheer force of will.

"And sooner than you know it," he said as he pointed a thick, sausage-like finger at her. "The Lothians will arrive to tear you down from that throne, and they'll bring the full might of the church with them to do it! So count your days, you demon temptress," he sneered. "Because you don't have many left."



## Chapter 974: An Unexpected Response

"The Lothians will arrive to tear you down from that throne, and they'll bring the full might of the church with them to do it! So count your days, you demon temptress, because you don't have many left!"

Ian Hanrahan's defiant warning of rescue and retribution unleashed a wave of whispers and mutters among the crowd, but if the captive baron expected his words to serve as any kind of rallying cry, he was doomed to be disappointed.

The Church had already sent some of their mightiest miracle workers. A Templar with a Holy Light Blade, an Inquisitor, and the Disciple of an Exemplar. Of those three, one suffered such a crippling defeat that he still lay in a healer's tent. According to some rumors, his eyes had been burned away and he could no longer bear to be in the presence of his own Holy Light Blade.

Meanwhile, the greatest hope the people had of finding salvation tonight, the Disciple of the Exemplar, stood bound in chains before them, his robes hanging in bloody tatters as proof that even he couldn't resist the demons. And when it came to the Inquisition... Inquisitor Diarmuid's presence on the dais made it clear that the only path the Church had managed to find through this nightmare was surrender and capitulation to the demon's demands.

Compared to the 'saviors' they had already lost, what more could the Church send without dispatching reinforcements all the way from the Holy City?

Head Priest Germot doubted there would be any rescue at all before the soldiers from across the sea arrived to take up the banner of a Holy War. Lothian March was too far away, and the fall of one of the baronies on the very edge of the Kingdom of Gaal wasn't consequential enough to make the old men in the Holy City send one of the few Exemplars they had.

When it came to relying on the Church to send aid... at best, help was five or six months away. At worst, events in Hanrahan Barony would cause people to rethink the Holy War, bolstering their forces further inland before marching west more than a year from now. By then, Germot was afraid that the Church wouldn't come as rescuers, but instead as purifiers.

Humans who were captured by demons that managed to escape, or had the good fortune to be rescued, had a chance to safely return to life in the Kingdom of Gaal. The Inquisition would examine such people thoroughly and so long as they were appropriately thankful to the Holy Lord of Light for delivering them

salvation from demon hands and showed no sign of embracing heretical thoughts, they could go about their lives as usual.

But the scale of what Dame Sybyll had done was utterly unprecedented. She hadn't come to take prisoners, she had come to sit on the throne as their ruler! Within a month, anyone still living in the walls of Hanrahan Town or on the farms that surrounded it, would likely be declared a heretic for choosing to live under demonic rule.

When the Church finally sent people to Hanrahan Barony, they wouldn't be giving the common folks their old lives back... they would 'liberate' them in fire and blood, burning out the heresy until there was no one left alive who had willingly served the demons.

Sir Thorryn's expression was nearly as grim as Head Priest Germot's when he considered how the Lothians would respond to this nightmare. Perhaps Bors Lothian would send out his armies to retake Hanrahan Barony but doing so would require rallying the other barons, assembling soldiers and preparing for a siege. Organizing that sort of campaign would take months at best, and help wouldn't arrive until the snows melted and the roads were usable again.

More likely, Bors Lothian would send a small raiding force to rescue his son, or perhaps he would even bargain with the demons to see Loman freed. But as much as Sir Thorryn hated the notion of living under the rule of a murderous demon, he struggled to believe that the forces of the March could do anything against the powerful demon army that had conquered their town in the span of a few hours.

Only a few people seemed to take Ian Hanrahan's threat seriously, and Roseen was one of those people.

"Cossot," she whispered as she clutched her friend's hand, hiding herself behind the taller woman and looking at the shackled baron in genuine fear. "If, if the Church comes, and they find out we were serving a dem-, er, serving Dame Sybyll..."

"Then she'll protect us," Cossot whispered, giving her friend's hand a reassuring squeeze. She hadn't taken her eyes off Dame Sybyll the entire time, and the crimson haired knight didn't look the least bit concerned about the former baron's threat. "She's kind to common people," Cossot said. "And even if the Lothians send their army and she has to leave her home again... I, I think I'd go with her."

"Cossot!" Roseen hissed. "You can't be serious!"

"You heard what the old baron said," Cossot said, finally turning her gaze on her friend. "When Dame Sybyll accused him of wanting to use her body for 'entertainment', he said she should have accepted the offer," Cossot said with the first sparks of genuine fury flickering in her eyes. "If he gets his throne back, do you think it would be good for us to be here? Don't say you've never seen him looking at you that way, I know you have!" she added pointedly.

"But, but if the Lothians and the Church come for her," Roseen stammered only to trail off when she saw Cossot shaking her head.

"She waited all these years to come home," Cossot said, turning her admiration-filled gaze back to Dame Sybyll. "Now that she's finally here... I don't think she'll let anyone drive her away again."

Across the great hall, there were similar murmurs. Many who had seen the demons attack first-hand expressed similar doubts about whether or not the Lothians and the church could truly rescue them. And a small but growing number of people, like Cossot, were starting to wonder if they might be better off now Dame Sybyll had taken the throne. After all, if there was one thing her 'tale of woe' made clear, it was that she understood painfully well how hard the life of the common folk could be, and just how much some of them suffered under the rule of distant and uncaring noblemen.

But if the lackluster response from the people of Hanrahan disappointed Ian Hanrahan, the response from the 'demons' in the room absolutely infuriated him.

-CHUFF CHUFF CHUFF CHUFF CHUFF-

-FRRRRRRUUUUUP FRUUU FRUUU FRRRRRRUUUUUP FRUUU FRUUU-

-AAAAAAWWWOOOOOOOO-

Everyone seated near the 'demon' section of the great hall shifted nervously in their seats and some fell over as they scrambled to their feet, tripping over themselves in their haste to escape the demons. To a few, it sounded like a quarter of the great hall had turned into a barnyard filled with howling dogs, squawking birds and snorting pigs.

To others, it sounded like Ian Hanrahan had succeeded in provoking the fear and fury of the demons when he threatened them with counter-attack by the combined forces of the Church and the Lothian March.

It wasn't until the tiniest demon of all, a mousy woman who stood only a few feet tall, joined in with a light, musical -TEE HEE HEE HEE- that the people sitting closest to the demons realized the demons weren't angry or shouting...

They were laughing.

#### Chapter 975: Puppets on Strings

The Hanrahan great hall was filled with the sounds of Eldritch laughter as the leaders of the Second Army heard Ian Hanrahan's 'threat.' On the dais, Sybyll and Heila exchanged an amused look while Hugo and Liam Dunn both looked at the captive Hanrahan baron with eyes full of pity.

"Cousin Ian," Sybyll said, holding up a hand to call the hall to silence. It took a few moments for even the most disciplined Iron Tusk infantry to still their shaking bellies, and a few moments more for the anxious, murmuring people of Hanrahan to quiet down after that, but once the hall was quiet, the Crimson Knight looked down on the captive baron from atop the throne that had once been his and spoke in a tone that was filled with scorn.

"Ye might think yer lords an' masters are mighty enough ta' ride ta yer rescue, or at least ta' avenge ye, but do ye' think we really came all this way an' didn'a expect some kind 'o response from tha' rulers of tha' march?" Sybyll asked, raising a crimson brow at the lord in chains.

"Her Dominion expects Bors or Owain will be forced ta' respond ta this an' her other attacks," Sybyll said with a predatory grin that fully revealed her fangs. "She's already taunted tha' Lothians wit' her raids, an' look what they did?" Sybyll said, pointing at Loman Lothian's tattered figure. "Bors Lothian sent her two gifts, an' I just had ta' come collect 'em fer her. Ye think she won't be pleased when Bors responds ta' tha' black eyes an' bloody nose she's just given 'im?"

Loman flinched when Sybyll pointed at him, but that reaction was instinctual. The more the Crimson Knight spoke, the more pieces fell into place in his mind, and with each one that clicked into place, the expression of horror on his face grew graver.

"She, she planned for this?" Loman muttered in disbelief as he stared into the vampire's bloodthirsty crimson gaze. "The Demon Lady of the Vale, she raided the farms in Dunn and the caravans in Hanrahan to provoke my father?" Loman asked as he turned his gaze to Hugo Hanrahan and Liam Dunn, where they sat on the dais.

"You traitors!" Loman spat as he glared at the two young lords. "Did you sell your people out to the demons because my father wouldn't send men to defend your hamlets, Liam?" Loman asked. His chains clanked and rattled as his whole body trembled in fury. "Or were the farms the demons raided just your sacrificial offering in order to bait my father into sending me out here to 'investigate' the raids?"

"It wasn't like that, Loman," the heir to the Dunn barony protested. "I might be sitting up here, but I'm a prisoner, just like you are. They captured me in Maeril Village before I even made it home, just like they took Sir Rain, Sir Carwyn, and Lord Hugo! We never did anything to betray anyone!"

"You didn't," Hugo said from his seat beside Liam. "But I won't pretend my hands are clean when they aren't. I might not have made the plans, but I offered up what I knew, and I led soldiers tonight..."

"Ye led soldiers to stop riots an' ta' keep tha' peace," Sybyll interrupted before her young cousin could say anything further. "I told ye b'fore, yer a good man, Hugo. One who does his best fer his people, even when tha' lords above ye want otherwise. Ye've been beatin' down too much b'fore but I won't have it now. Don't let these people tar you as a traitor when yer doin more fer Hanrahan 'an yer swine of a father ever did."

"After all," Sybyll added, turning a menacing glare at the shackled lord. "Ye aren't the sort who would murder his own aunt just ta' cling to a throne that don't belong to ye."

Sitting next to Heila, Diarmuid's eyes flicked rapidly between the two young lords, filing away every word and subtle gesture. Hugo at least sounded genuine when he confessed to supporting the demons in their schemes, but there was something furtive in Liam Dunn's eyes, and his protest came too quickly, almost as if he was hoping to plaster over something else before suspicion could land on him.

Beyond that, when Sybyll spoke up for her young cousin Hugo, there was something in Liam's gaze that looked... longing. As if he wished for the same sort of praise to be bestowed on him, and from the set of his jaw, he felt determined to do... something. Diarmuid just didn't have enough pieces to understand what, but there was clearly more going on between the young Dunn lord and Dame Sybyll than he was admitting to.

But now that Diarmuid knew the young lords were involved in all of this, he started to see a pattern emerging in a number of events he'd witnessed since his arrival in Lothian March. Perhaps this grand scheme had started with the murder of Sir Kaefin, or rather, perhaps the murder had been one of the first moves in the much larger scheme that was playing out now.

If the Demon Lady of the Vale wanted to put Sir Hugo in place as Owain's Steward, then sending one of her witches, the woman called 'Lynnda' to kill Sir Kaefin suddenly made a great deal of sense. Until now, no one had been able to offer a convincing reason why the demons would send an assassin after such a minor figure.

But if Hugo Hanrahan had been their agent from long ago, perhaps ever since Bastian Hanrahan recovered, when Hugo was once again relegated to the status of 'spare heir', then killing Sir Kaefin to create an opening for Hugo to exploit suddenly made much more sense. Especially when Diarmuid considered that the Demon Lady of the Vale had a sympathetic figure like Dame Sybyll, who shared a plight similar to Hugo's, to recruit him into their ranks.

"It's like a web woven by a spider," Diarmuid murmured as his eyes shot back over to the young lord sitting next to the Hanrahan bastard who had already confessed to conspiring with the demons.

Liam Dunn's campaign over the summer had enjoyed levels of success unmatched by any other attempt at expansion in recent history. So much so that Diarmuid had discussed the events of the summer with Loman Lothian several times once he'd returned from the Holy City. When they spoke, Loman had mentioned more than once that they found demon villages abandoned and evacuated ahead of their advance, and that the demons seemed more interested in wounding the Dunn soldiers than slaying them.

At the time, they'd thought that the demons were afraid of the growing strength of the Dunn army and that they were lashing out in the only ways they could out of a sense of cruelty and spite. They thought the demons wanted to bleed the Dunns as much as they could before they fled in fear... but what if they were putting on an act the whole time?

With Loman present to heal the wounded, the demons only needed to inflict light injuries to put on the appearance of a battle while their allies, the Dunns, claimed glory for their victories! Without Loman present, they never could have put on such a convincing charade, but with one of the greatest healers in the March to ensure that casualties were kept to a minimum, Liam could send his men into carefully

prepared 'ambushes', and arrive at empty demon villages that had been 'coincidentally' evacuated just hours before their arrival!

And then, when the demons launched their most daring action yet, they sent Liam Dunn to attend the meeting of the Lothian Court. Ostensibly, he was there to plead his case for his Barony and the support they needed, but what if it had been a trap all along? If they had sent men to Dunn Barony instead of Hanrahan, would they have fallen into an even worse trap?

"Yer right about one thing, Cousin Ian. Tha' raids were intended ta' be provoking," Sybyll said as she leaned back in the throne, assuming a relaxed, languid posture as if she wasn't concerned about the response the attacks had provoked at all. "But wrong about who yer enemy is. My Mistress, the one you call the 'Demon Lady of The Vale' is only lending her support ta' the woman who's responsible fer all this."

"Yer real enemy is one of yer own makin'" Sybyll said with a brief glance at Heila and Hauke. "The woman ye' should be afraid of is one of tha' Great Witches, tha' Mother of Trees herself," Sybyll said with an amused grin. "An' so far, yer all dancin' like puppets on strings every time she tugs on ye."

"So, Cousin Ian," Sybyll said, returning everyone's attention to the captured baron. "If yer' hopin' fer' a rescue, ye'd best give up on that now. When Her Dominion comes ta' claim what's hers, nottin' in Lothian March will stop her. Not that ye'll be alive ta' see it, Cousin Ian..."

Chapter 976: Ashlynn's Lessons (Part One)

"Not that ye'll be alive ta' see it, Cousin Ian..."

The instant she said it, Sybyll wished she could snatch the words back. She knew she was pushing her limits when she mentioned the way the Lothians had been dancing to Lady Ashlynn's tune, but Ian looked so smug and confident that she would fall not long after him, and when Loman piled on by lashing out at Hugo...

She'd lost control of her tongue, just like she'd lost control of her temper in the west gate plaza when Loman's arrow nearly claimed Lord Jalal's life. And in doing so, she put everything that she and Ashlynn had planned at risk.

During the long nights that Sybyll spent training with Ashlynn and Thane, preparing the young witch to claim her vengeance against Owain Lothian, there had been moments of pause and rest. In those moments, Lady Ashlynn paid back the lessons she received in swordsmanship by helping Sybyll prepare herself to seize control of Hanrahan Barony.

"You're very strong, Sybyll," Ashlynn warned the crimson-haired vampire one night while she nibbled on one of Georg's meat-filled hand pies. "The people are afraid of the strength of the Crimson Knight, and they should be. You can cleave any one of them in half in an instant."

"I wouldn't kill my own people," Sybyll protested. "The only ones who need to die are my cousin Ian, and those that aid him in his wickedness. They rest have nothing to fear."

"I know that," Ashlynn said calmly, licking flakes of pastry from her fingers. "You know that. But your people won't know that. They'll know that the Crimson Knight came with an army. If things go badly and Ian won't face you, and I doubt he will, then at least some of the defenders will die before you take the town."

"So when you first meet your people, they will be afraid of the Crimson Knight," Ashlynn explained. "But they won't know how to feel about Sybyll Hanrahan. That's why it's so important that, when you finally meet them without your armor, you choose not only the stories you tell, but the parts of yourself that you reveal."

"My cousin is a coward, a murderer, a swindler, and a lying cheat," Sybyll said bluntly. "You've already brought me his bastard son. Hugo knows where their ledgers are. He knows their schemes. His swine of a father has hidden away their line his own pockets. He might not know of their men Ian's had killed or their women he's spoiled, but he knows enough to lay it out before their people."

"They'll turn on him and they'll follow me for freeing them from his abuse," the vampire knight said confidently. "I'll just lay out their truth for them, and we'll go from there."

"It's not enough," Ashlynn said, shaking her head and leaning against a fallen tree, quietly soaking up the energy of the forest to replenish herself while her late-night meal settled in her stomach. "You can give the people a reason to turn away from Ian Hanrahan, and you're right, his own crimes will make that easy enough."



"But you need to give them something more than a reason to turn away from him," Ashlynn continued, closing her eyes as she remembered her father standing before the Blackwell court, packed with knights, barons, ship captains, guild masters, and so many other people of power and influence.

Her father called gatherings of the Blackwell Court the most troubled waters a ship could ever sail through. Every man held secrets, like sandbars beneath the waves. Each group was driven by strong desires, like strong and steady currents. And scattered through the crowd were deeply entrenched convictions, like stones near the shore that couldn't be moved.

Navigating that meant knowing your ship and keeping it under tight control. If you let your ship get pulled off course, then a sudden gust that shouldn't have ruffled your sails became instantly calamitous. You had to choose which side of your ship to present to the wind, how much to trim your sails, and how to balance your vessel if you wanted to make it through the maelstrom, and it was the same in a room full of powerful people.

"When you appear before your people," Ashlynn said. "The very first thing you need to do is show them your wounds," she explained. "Not the wounds from battle, but the wounds you carry in your heart," she added, tapping her own chest where she could feel the comforting, steady pulse of Nyrielle's heartbeat alongside her own.

"The Crimson Knight is an invulnerable, unstoppable killer, capable of killing even the greatest warriors the Kingdom or the Church can send against us," Ashlynn continued. "But Sybyll Hanrahan is a woman who has been wronged, and the common people you need to influence have been taught all their lives how to feel about a woman who has been wronged. You can use that to invite them in, to give them a reason to listen to your words and turn toward you."

When Ashlynn said it, Sybyll's face grew dark and her hand twitched toward the blunted sword she'd been using for training. Before she could erupt, however, her mentor piled on against her, and she found it difficult to ignore him when he spoke in the same calm, comfortable tones he'd used to help her reforge herself from the scarred and bloodthirsty avenger she'd been into the knight she had become.

"Listen to Lady Ashlynn's words carefully," Thane said lightly. "She picks each one with the same kind of care that you use when you choose your ground to stand on or the angle of your sword when you attack."

"But I don't want to manipulate my own people the way Aiden and Ian have!" Sybyll said. "I won't scheme against them. If I do, how am I any different from the usurper who stole my father's throne or his murderer's?"

"Did Ashlynn ask you to lie?" Thane asked. "Did she tell you to present yourself to your people as anything other than what you are?" As he spoke, he set down his own practice sword and appeared beside Sybyll in a blink, resting his hand gently on her armored forearm and looking directly into her crimson eyes as he spoke.

"You told me once that you weren't ashamed of who you were, or what you had done to survive in the years before Mistress Nyrielle found you," Thane said gently. "You said that you refused to be shamed for doing everything you could and using every advantage you had in order to avenge yourself on the people who had wronged you and your mother."

"That's still true," Sybyll said as she took slow, steady breaths to still the beating of her heart. It was harder, she realized, now that she'd received Mistress Nyrielle's gift of the Reawakening of the Heart. The old pains that she'd thought had long been ground away felt fresh and new, and the armor she'd wrapped around her heart long ago felt like it was suddenly full of gaps she'd never noticed before.

"I won't be shamed by it," Sybyll said. "But to use it to manipulate the common folk feels... Dishonest," she admitted.

Perhaps, she thought, she didn't belong on her father's throne after all. Maybe it would be enough simply to see Ian dead. That was all she'd ever asked for, and it was also the only thing that Mistress Nyrielle had promised her. The notion of reclaiming her father's throne had always been a distant dream, slowly worn away by time as years turned into decades since her father's death.

If she would have to turn herself into the kind of lying, scheming aristocrat that she'd come to despise in her long years of exile, just so she could reclaim a throne she'd never expected to hold... maybe it would be better for Mistress Nyrielle and Lady Ashlynn to find someone else to take over Hanrahan Barony once she'd slain her cousin and claimed her vengeance.

#### Chapter 977: Ashlynn's Lessons (Part Two)

"No, I'm not telling you that you need to be dishonest," Ashlynn corrected Sybyll when she noticed that she'd touched on a wound within the other woman's heart that was unexpectedly tender. She had to

remind herself, once again, that despite the fact that Sybyll was a knight and the daughter of a Baron, she hadn't benefited from a nobleman's upbringing.

Ashlynn had tried to approach Sybyll like she was a fellow nobleman's daughter, and a little bit, she realized, like she would have broached these topics with Jocelynn. It was easy to fall into familiar habits, discussing political strategy the way she would have with her younger sister, as if this was just another 'forbidden' picnic on the cliffs overlooking the Blackwell harbor.

But in truth, the Crimson Knight had much more in common with Ollie than she did with Jocelynn, and she needed to offer an approach that would appeal to Sybyll's more straightforward way of looking at the world and its leaders.

"Go to your people with complete honesty," Ashlynn suggested. "Share with them the hurts you suffered, and they'll understand why you would go so far, bringing an army to their doorstep and fighting your way to the heart of Hanrahan Keep to seize your cousin and hold him accountable for his crimes."

"Once you've done that," Ashlynn said, holding up one finger and then raising a second to indicate the next point in the strategy she was helping Sybyll develop to take control of the barony as smoothly as possible. "You need to transform your individual pain into a shared pain. Before you claim your cousin's life, before you even threaten it, you need to lay out his crimes against the rest of his people."

"You know he's guilty, Sybyll," Thane added. "You've visited your homeland every winter for close to twenty years. You've seen the way his people suffer, and now, you have his own son to stand as a witness against him. Help your people see your cousin Ian the way you do. Reveal his secrets one by one until they're as sick of him and disgusted by him as you are."

"If you can do that," Thane said with a wistful, sad smile. "If you can do that, then you'll avoid the mistake my sister made when she killed the baron who forced himself on her. His people thought he was a hero who protected them from demons during the War of Undying Demons. He was their guardian who they revered as much as they revered the Holy Lord of Light, and she took him from them."

Even though she'd been wronged. Even though he was the sort of man who would force himself on his vassal's daughter and coerce her by threatening to send her father to the front lines in the next war, the people hadn't known any of it. So when she claimed the life of the man who wronged her, the people

cried out for justice, and they wouldn't rest until the young Marquis executed her for the crime of magnicide.

"Ian Hanrahan will die, one way or another," Ashlynn promised. "But the difference will be whether the people are afraid that they'll be next, or they cheer to see his head mounted in the central plaza."

"That's why it's so important that you put him on trial for his crimes, and let the people turn against him before you lay claim to his life," Ashlynn counseled her. "Move too strongly against him too soon, and they'll doubt the evidence against him, and you risk everything falling apart. But if you can hold yourself back long enough to show them that you were wronged, and they were wronged as well... then your people will not only bow down to your strength, they'll welcome your rule."

In the end, Sybyll had come to accept Lady Ashlynn's advice. It wasn't easy. She had to overcome her distaste for the methods that noblemen used to rule in human lands, and some of Ashlynn's methods felt... uncomfortable. Underhanded. But both Ashlynn and Thane had reminded her that ruling over humans who only knew the ways and traditions of the Kingdom of Gaal and the Church would be different than ruling over the Eldritch.

On Airgead Mountain, Sybyll had grown to appreciate the simple unity she found among the Soft Paws Clan. They might scrap and tussle, but they never came for each other's lives. Perhaps the people in Hanrahan would find the folk from Airgead Mountain to be quick-tempered and prone to violence, but when she lived among Jalal's people, disagreements were solved as quickly as they formed.

There might be some hissing, some swatting, and a few cuts and bruises if it were a serious dispute, but then it was over. There were no grudges, and afterwards, the victor helped the loser tend to their wounds as they came back together as one people again.

Hanrahan wasn't like that, or at least, it wasn't like that yet. Sybyll had to accept her people the way they were right now until she could teach them a better way, and that meant learning to act like a human lady instead of an Eldritch lord, at least for now.

Once she'd come to accept that, Ashlynn had schooled her in the etiquette of holding court and the ways of ruling that Sybyll would have learned from her own father if she'd had the chance to grow up beside him. She made certain that Sybyll could play the part of Baron Brighton Hanrahan's returning daughter and not just the role of a conquering, bloodthirsty vampire.

There had been so much preparation for the night when she would sit upon the throne and take her rightful place before her people, and yet, in a single moment, with a few hasty words and a slip of the tongue, Sybyll had put all of it at risk by doing exactly what Ashlynn had warned her not to... She claimed Ian's life before she'd convinced her people of his guilt.

Worse than that, she'd revealed that her attack on Hanrahan Town was part of a much larger scheme, one aimed at the Lothians and the entire march. The instant she did that, she could hear the mutters rippling through the crowd, wondering if it had all been a lie, a convenient story to turn them into 'puppets on strings,' using the very same words she'd used to describe the Lothians.

Sitting beside her, Heila watched as a sudden stillness overtook the powerful vampire. The tightening of her eyes, the slightest shift of her fingers on the armrests of her throne... People who hadn't lived among vampires might not notice the subtle signs, but Heila had spent her entire life in Lady Nyrielle's fortress or traveling with Lady Ashlynn and Lady Nyrielle.

She could tell that Sybyll had made a mistake, and she was trying to find a way to fix it, but this wasn't her battlefield. Ashlynn might have been able to shift the conversation, to plaster over the hasty words or redirect the people's attention to something else, but Sybyll was a knight, not a noble lady, and she had yet to master the tools that Ashlynn had given her in a few brief days of mutual lessons. And so Heila did what a lady-in-waiting should do... she looked for a way to help without drawing attention to herself.

"Remember, Inquisitor," Heila said softly as she turned her attention from Sybyll to the man sitting on her other side. "Dame Sybyll didn't invite you here to be a prop or an ornament. You're here to seek the truth and see justice done," she said, shaking the man loose from his inwardly spiralling thoughts as he'd clearly become lost in the implications of Sybyll and Hugo's revelations.

"Before Dame Sybyll can sentence her cousin to die, you can speak up for the accused," Heila prompted. "And if you don't, it's likely that no one else will. Can you accept that, Inquisitor?" Heila asked.

"No, no I can't," Diarmuid said as he regathered his thoughts and looked around the hall. Already, he could see that some parts of the crowd were turning ugly. The people were frightened...

Even he had been frightened. But the Lord of Light never promised that it would be easy to do what was right, and tonight, Diarmuid had resolved to save as many people as he could, even if it meant doing the hardest thing imaginable and serving on a court with demons. But since he'd placed himself here in

order to protect the people, he had to do his part, even if it meant provoking a vampire who could easily end his life and the lives of everyone else in the great hall.

"Dame Sybyll," Diarmuid said loudly, calling attention to himself as he leaned forward to address the imposing woman. "I wonder if you would allow me to ask a few questions..."

#### Chapter 978: The Crimes of the Accused

The entire great hall seemed to be holding its breath as they stared at the lone Inquisitor sitting on the dais.

Of everyone sitting on the dais, only Diarmuid had participated in the defense of Hanrahan Town. Dame Sybyll, for all that she was a Hanrahan, was also a vampire, and even the most sympathetic members of the audience had just seen how quickly she could shift from sympathetic damsel to bloodthirsty predator.

Aside from the Crimson Knight herself, the court might look balanced. Three demons and three humans. At first glance, it seemed like a tremendous concession to the defeated party. But Hugo Hanrahan openly admitted that he sided with his cousin rather than his father, and Liam Dunn's status as a 'prisoner' was ambiguous at best. There were no shackles on his hands, unlike Loman Lothian and the remainder of the Hanrahan family.

But Diarmuid, sitting between a witch and a frost-horned demon, had gone to the walls to help the defenders. He had the courage to do what Ian and Bastian Hanrahan hadn't, and he had the courage to not only sit there now, but to speak up, and for that alone, the people of Hanrahan respected him.

"Dame Sybyll," Diarmuid began, choosing his words with exceptional care. "When we spoke before, you told me that my place on your court was to call you out if you strayed from justice to vengeance. Is that still true? Or is Baron Ian Hanrahan doomed to die no matter what?"

From his position on the floor, standing in chains, Ian looked at the Inquisitor with a bit of reluctant admiration. As much as he loathed the man for finding a way to stand in judgment against everyone else here, he had to give some respect to the man for having the courage to ask that question... Even if it was just the respect he gave to a fool who was about to die even faster than Ian himself would.

"Me cousin, Ian, doomed himself wit' his own actions," Sybyll said as she clawed back her desire to say something even more scathing. "But I didn'a convene a whole court just ta' pronounce judgment. Ask yer questions, Inquisitor," Sybyll said with a graceful gesture toward Ian. "Let tha' people hear his wrongs laid bare t'night, an' then tha' court can make its judgment."

"Thank you, Dame Sybyll, for your magnanimity," Diarmuid said as he stood to give a slight bow before turning to face Ian Hanrahan. "Baron Hanrahan, you stand accused of magnicide. It's a serious crime that carries the penalty of death," the inquisitor began, speaking more for the people than for the baron himself. After all, the crime was so rare that most people wouldn't understand the severity of the crime.

"Further, if you are found guilty of this crime, you will be stripped of all lands, titles, and privileges as a peer of the kingdom," Diarmuid continued. "Your heirs will inherit nothing and will live the rest of their days as commoners. The crime of magnicide is not only the murder of an ordinary person, but a person who has received the blessing of the Holy Lord of Light in recognition of lifetimes of piety in their struggle, and the punishment you will face for this is exceptionally grave," Diarmuid explained.

"Yes, yes, I know," Ian snapped, already irritated that the Inquisitor seemed to have free rein not only to question the Crimson Knight, but to hold a sermon in what had been Ian's own great hall just hours ago. "You will stake my body out for the crows to feast on. I will have no pyre. My bones will be left in the open until the sun bakes them to dust. I will not reach the Heavenly shores. Did I forget anything? Inquisitor?" Ian mocked.

"Ye forgot nothin'," Sybyll said from her throne as she gave her cousin a hungry smile. "But yer wrong ta' think that it'll be as simple as desecrating yer bones when yer dead an' gone. Ye may beg fer a death so quick b'fore tha' night is done."

"Be good ta' tha' Inquisitor," Sybyll warned. "I've seen me' Mistress keep a man alive fer eighty years o' sufferin' an torture fer what he did ta' her people. If tha' Inquisitor catches ye lyin' ta him, I might just start addin' years ta' yer life, just fer ye ta' suffer longer b'fore tha' end," she said menacingly.

Hearing her words, Ian Hanrahan visibly paled, and Bastian dropped to his knees where he stood. The young man tried to speak, to plead that he'd already told her everything he knew, but when he looked into his cousin's crimson eyes, he couldn't make his throat work, and his lips just moved soundlessly as he pleaded for mercy.

"Dame Sybyll," Diarmuid said with a frown at the woman sitting languidly on her throne. "Threats aren't necessary for me to gain the truth from Baron Hanrahan. He'll answer my questions, one way or the other," the Inquisitor said as he returned his attention to Ian Hanrahan.

"There are two things I want to make clear from the beginning," Diarmuid continued as he tried to force the proceedings back on track. There was sweat running down his back, and part of him was afraid of what exactly Dame Sybyll might do to him if she was displeased by what he was about to say.

Her reminder that the demons had methods of punishing a man that went far beyond what even the Church could do to a criminal scratched at his mind like a dog at the door, begging to come in from the cold, but he refused to allow thoughts of demonic punishment into his mind to distract him.

"The first thing to make clear is the severity of the crime that Baron Hanrahan is accused of," Diarmuid said, clasping his hands behind his back as he began to pace across the front of the raised dais. "The second is his defense. Baron Hanrahan, you don't deny killing Dame Sybyll's mother," the Inquisitor said, pausing in his pacing to look directly into the eyes of the accused lord.

"Instead, you deny that you did anything wrong," Diarmuid said. "You deny that Dame Sybyll is the daughter of your Aunt Caitlin, or that the woman you killed was your Aunt Caitlin. You assert that they are frauds who attempted to swindle you, and you executed her mother for that crime."

On the throne, Sybyll bristled at hearing her mother being called a fraud, but she held her temper back firmly, despite her desire to leap to her mother's defense. Diarmuid would prove things out, she just had to give him time, she reminded herself.

She might not have as much faith in his character as Heila did, but the diminutive witch seemed to possess some unique insight into the Inquisitor, and Sybyll was willing to put her faith in Heila. After all, the diminutive witch had more than earned Sybyll's trust with her deeds in the battle tonight.

But on the floor beneath the dais, a slow smile appeared on Ian Hanrahan's face as he realized that the Inquisitor hadn't given up on him entirely. He was opening a door for the baron to explain that, even if he'd killed the old cripple, it hadn't been a crime at all. And once the people understood that, once the entire crowd was on his side, and most importantly, now that the 'Crimson Knight' had given up the impenetrable armor that made her all but unkillable...



Ian Hanrahan would have his chance to turn his people into a rabid mob that would tear her down like a pack of dogs chasing a doe caught in an open field. All he needed to do was bring the men in the crowd over to his side... and he knew just the way to do it.

And if the men in the great hall couldn't overcome the unarmored demon with the witch and her fellow demons at her side, then so what? Even if nine out of ten people in the hall died in the attempt, so long as Ian was able to make his way to a loyal retainer or two who could help him escape, then he'd have a chance to flee to Lothian City, or perhaps all the way to the Holy City, where no demons could possibly reach him.

If he could scoop up Loman in the chaos, he might even gain the bargaining chip he needed in order to buy his way into the Church's good graces. After all, rescuing the Disciple of an Exemplar had to be worth some kind of reward...

#### Chapter 979: Ian Hanrahan's Vile Tongue (Part One)

"That woman broke into my chambers with her daughter all tarted up like an offering," Ian insisted, his voice gaining strength as he found the opportunity he needed to seize control of the narrative with the kind of accusations that had served him well in the Lothian Court for decades. "She tried saying anything she could to make it seem like she was my late Aunt Caitlin, but even if she was, who's to say this demon whore is really a Hanrahan at all?"

Ian's eyes swept across the crowd, meeting the gazes of men he knew would understand his position. Men like Sir Thorryn with a noble name to defend, or Cossot's father Gaius, with the fortune he'd built over decades spent perfecting his craft as one of the most skilled whitesmiths in the march. Men who knew the threat that a poisonous woman could present to their reputations and their wealth.

"Just think about it from where I sat," Ian continued before anyone could interrupt him. "A woman shows up in my chambers, fifteen years after my aunt and uncle died, claiming to be my long-dead aunt, with a pretty girl by her side who just might be the right age to maybe, possibly, by the thinnest of margins, have been conceived by my esteemed uncle, Brighton."

"How convenient that she waited until my father was dead before making her claim?" Ian asked, turning his back on the Inquisitor to address the crowd directly. "How convenient that she brings a girl who could pass for having Hanrahan blood, demanding I provide for her like nobility," he sneered. "You people all know good and well how some women are. They'll turn up with a child and claim anyone's the father if they think he's got a fat purse for them to suckle from."

"I imagine you're an expert in these things, aren't you, Father?" Hugo Hanrahan fumed from his seat on the dais. "What was it you always told your wife about my mother? That she plied you with drink and took advantage of you? All so she could shove her fingers into your purse?"

Hugo's words momentarily stunned his father, who had gotten so caught up in his attempts to smear Sybyll and her mother that he'd forgotten about his own... indiscretions. But even as Ian struggled to find a way to plaster over his son's words, other people in the crowd were nodding along with the captive baron's argument.

"You see, pumpkin?" Sir Thorryn said quietly as he pulled his daughter close. "This is why I keep telling you that a man has to be careful about the women he lets around him. When you're old enough to start courting, don't think ill of a young lord who's worried that you're only looking for a way into his bed so you can latch on to his title and his fortune. The world is full of wicked women who would do just that," he said sagely.

"But father," Drema protested. "Baron Hanrahan admitted that Lord Hugo is his son. If he had never lain with Lord Hugo's mother, then there wouldn't be a problem to begin with."

"That..." Sir Thorryn started, only to pause as he looked into his daughter's stubborn gaze, finding that she was starting to resemble her mother more and more, and that his sweet, adorable, and obedient daughter was slowly turning into a young woman. A young woman with certain opinions of her own that he needed to correct before it was too late.

"Even if the Lord Baron fell prey to a woman's wiles," Sir Thorryn said. "That doesn't mean there aren't still women out there who will take advantage. Even if Lord Ian never touched her, all she'd have to do is slip into his bed chambers at night after he's had a bit too much to drink and then be seen slipping out of them half an hour later. It would be enough to start rumors, and she could try to pass off any man's child as his."

"You need to grow up to be a good young lady of virtue," he insisted as he patted her head, longing for the days when she accepted his words as the Light's own gospel without asking questions or talking back. "That way, you're never caught up in all of this, and your husband will never stray from you!"

While Sir Thorryn was schooling his increasingly willful and rebellious daughter, Ian seemed to have recovered himself enough to protest his son's characterization of what had happened between himself and the young chambermaid that he'd forced himself upon in a night of drunken excess. Ian was certain

that the wench had never told their son the truth of that night, she was far too ashamed of it afterward, but it didn't hurt to make sure the audience understood the 'official' account of things.

"It's true that your mother took advantage of me in a moment of weakness and strong drink," Ian said, as though he was admitting to a great personal failing. "But it was a day for feasting, and she had her share of strong wine as well. Mistakes were made," he said, as if equal blame were to be born by both of them. "But haven't I always cared for her, provided for her, and for you? I may have wronged my wife, and wronged your mother too, but I've done what any man should do if he fathers a child!"

"Yet it's because good men like me care for their bastards that scheming women will try to take advantage. Even if that crone really was my dear aunt Caitlin," Ian continued, playing things up for the men in the crowd who were nodding in agreement with his words. "She spent fourteen years running from village to village, and according to this demon whore, her mother did whatever she had to in order to survive," Ian sneered.

"Fourteen years among strangers, depending on the charity of men, we'll never know. Are we really supposed to believe she remained chaste all that time? Or is it more likely that some tavern keeper or traveling merchant gave her what she needed to survive... and left her with a child to explain?"

#### Chapter 980: Ian Hanrahan's Vile Tongue (Part Two)

Toward the back of the crowd, Madam Cordelia fumed, and her face had turned a shade well beyond red with the fury that threatened to erupt from her. She'd been a much younger woman when she served Baroness Caitlin, but her lady had always been kind, gentle, and generous to a fault with people around her.

It had been heartrending enough to hear Dame Sybyll talk about the way the old Baroness had suffered for fifteen long years after everyone else had mourned her and given her up for dead. In Baroness Caitlin's day, every feast produced so much excess that every servant who toiled away while others feasted was able to take home a small feast of their own to share with their family, and she saw to it that no one working in the keep ever went hungry.

To hear that she'd been forced to beg, that she'd been beaten and robbed just for trying to get help, and likely suffered much, much worse from the cruel men who preyed upon the weak and the vulnerable was already heartbreaking. But to hear the filth dripping from Baron Hanrahan's mouth as he slandered a woman who has sacrificed everything to protect and care for her daughter... It was almost more than Madam Cordelia's frail old heart could bear.

Elsewhere in the crowd, however, a few voices had begun to mutter in support of Baron Hanrahan's scandalous accusations.

"...It happened ta' me cousin in Lothian City, I swears it did," one man said quietly to his neighbor.

"Spent one night havin' a roll in tha' hay with wench come in from the countryside fer market, a year later, she's back again wit' a babe in her arms, layin claim ta' a quarter of his wealth fer tha' raisin of his child. His wife almost tossed him out on tha' street right then an' there..."

"...Once Baron Hanrahan acknowledged Hugo as his son, how many people fell out of trees and crawled out of bogs to claim to be another of his bastards?" another man asked. "A man has one moment of weakness and suddenly everyone acts like he can't keep his sword in his scabbard..."

"...This is why a man's got ta' keep a firm hand wit' his women," a third man told his neighbor, speaking as if it was an argument they'd had in the past. "Black her eyes once so she knows not ta' look at another man, and smash her hand if she ever touches a fellow who isn't you. Otherwise, yer as like as not to find yerself raisin' up some other man's child..."

"Or maybe it's more likely that this demon is a victim herself," Ian speculated loudly, continuing to pile on the scorn and derision as he heard his message taking hold in the crowd. "I wouldn't be surprised if she were a random child who bore a slight resemblance to my late aunt, certainly more of one than she bore to the old cripple who showed up in my chambers."

"She was a convenient tool in the old crone's deception," the captive baron proclaimed confidently. "A child fed lies about her own parentage from the very beginning. No wonder that old hag would never try to prove her identity to any of the people who would certainly have helped my late aunt if it turned out she'd still been alive..."

Suddenly, the ground at Ian Hanrahan's feet erupted into flames, singeing his fine clothes and shooting up high enough to reach his waist, where the intense heat seemed to focus almost maliciously on his nether-regions.

"Aaaa!!!" Ian cried, dancing back away from the tongues of flame that vanished as quickly as they appeared. In his haste to escape the heat, he stumbled over his chains and fell painfully on his backside while clutching himself protectively. Only when he was certain that he was still intact did he look upward to meet the dark, smoldering gaze of the Inquisitor on the dais.

Diarmuid held a tiny mote of flame in his right hand, which he quickly dismissed before returning the hand to clasp its companion behind his back while he glowered at the portly baron.

"Don't think that you can insult or degrade a lady simply because I asked Dame Sybyll not to threaten you," Diarmuid said fiercely as he reached the limit of what he could tolerate from the blustering baron.

He'd allowed the man to speak freely to give the man an opportunity to reveal truths, and indeed, the baron had revealed several truths. Unfortunately, the greatest truth he revealed to the Inquisitor's trained ears was the truth of how low he would stoop and how much he would distort facts if he felt it would serve his own ends.

"And don't believe that I won't see through blatant lies," Diarmuid added sternly. "You know that woman was her mother. You never once thought that she was unrelated to Dame Sybyll."

"Cheap theatrics like that might work when you're sitting on a throne, Baron Hanrahan," the Inquisitor reminded him. "But before the Inquisition, all men are the same. I'm not one of your knights to bow down before your title, nor one of your fellow barons who is too consumed by protecting their own interests to expose your lies. If you lie to me, I will see through it and you will burn for it," he said sharply.

"Now, tell me that you understand the rules, Baron Hanrahan," Diarmuid said. "And then we can proceed with the real questions."

"I, I understand," Ian Hanrahan said with sweat plastering his thinning hair to his scalp. He'd thought that he could put on a show before the audience. He'd thought that if he could sway the crowd the way he so often swayed the Lothian Court over the years, if he could gain the support of the people with a few cheap exaggerations and a bit of blustering, he could create the opening he needed to get out of this mess. And he'd thought that the Inquisitor would defer to his title enough to allow him to get away with it.

Clearly, he'd been very, very wrong about this particular Inquisitor.

"Good," Diarmuid said as he resumed his pacing across the dais with his hands clasped behind his back, as though nothing untoward had happened. "Now, answer my first question," Diarmuid said as he looked down at the baron. "As a loyal vassal of the Lothian Marquis, why didn't you throw Sybyll and the

woman claiming to be Baroness Caitlin into your dungeons until you could turn them over to the Lothian Court?"

"After all," Diarmuid pointed out. "Magnicide is a serious crime, and they accused your father of murdering your uncle. Wasn't it your duty to bring their accusation before your liege lord so that you could clear your father's good name?"

"Or did you kill the old woman because you knew that she was Caitlin Hanrahan?" Diarmuid asked. "And you were trying to conceal your father's crime?"