

A Prayer of Love

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Content warning: Speciesism, implied slavery, physical injury, and mention of religion.

"Cow. *Miriam's Legacy*."

"Cow. *Arbour Architecture*."

"Cow. *Prayers to Cunning Felpar*."

The heifer hustled between the stacks, fetching each tome as it was called out by her overseer. The aged wolf had little tolerance for slowness or clumsiness, and his expectations for a book-runner were impossibly high. It was only Deirdre's keen memory and understanding of the library's organization that kept his words to her so curt and comparatively polite; it did not go unnoticed by the other monastery residents and thus forced him to begrudgingly acknowledge her services despite her most lowly breed. It was as close to something resembling someone liking her as Deirdre had ever gotten.

"Yes, Master Sharpclaw!"

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Disgrace after disgrace had led Deirdre to this life. She'd failed at every craft and prospective profession normally given to those of bovine blood. In her hands, sewing resulted in more shredded clothes than mended ones. Her cooking had successfully upset a pig's stomach. Produce seemed happy to be accidentally trampled beneath her hooves as the alternative was a slow, wilting death. Pottery and housekeeping both seemed to result in flying debris when Deirdre was at the wheel.

Despite her faults, her superiors were not so keen to throw away someone so easily usable. Her reverence and fear were complete, her prayers were memorized word-for-word, and her looks were not unappealing. Granted, they weren't extraordinary enough to make her desired for prostitution or harem work, but she was hardly a blemish when working obediently among the usually predator-exclusive areas. Exceptions were made, and she was trained in reading and writing to work among the shelves of the Church of Tooth and Claw's library.

But, no matter her position, she was lowly before all. Visitors were dressed in jewelry, rich colors, and bearing masterwork weapons in a display more of status than martial work. The true monks and priests of the monastery were draped in patterned robes, loose gold bangles and a holy pendant adorning them with a look of holy authority. Deirdre, however, wore sackcloth robes made of a thick, worn, and coarse fabric that frayed along the edges. The aged clothing shuffled about her heavy-set form as she scurried from here to there, practically blending into the wooden shelves when not directly beneath one of the illuminating crystal lamps. The only other thing she wore was a collar, wrought iron fused around her neck and emblazoned with the most plain and obvious symbol of her faith.

Deirdre, however, bore the brightest of smiles. This, surely, was as good as it got for someone like her. Born to serve her betters, born to answer to a higher being, to live and die to their advantage, a cow like her who'd failed at so much was given a chance to be useful even

still. Every day, she thanked Bov, worshiping the small altar the monastery allowed her morning and night. And every day, she read more and more, learning all she could. Most of all, she read the prayers. Every scrawled line, every ancient verse, all in worship of the true order of things. How could she not love everyone so completely when they had allowed a cow as disgraceful as her to live and serve?

Her time in the library was paradise. They still had Deirdre attempt to serve in other ways, of course. Spilled tea earned derisive remarks and floggings, and a speck of dirt missed between a canine's toes meant Deirdre was far more often cleaning privies than feet. The cow was kept 'in prime' by her martial training, her workouts and defensive training harsh to ensure her 'livestock' rations were not going to make her fat and trivial. While they ideally wanted prey capable of serving the front-lines as fodder for the proud nation of Vulrok (who gave so generously and provided for their Church), Deirdre's staff training failed to produce a true fighter in her. "I would have her defend the holy hooks here, anyway," Master Sharpclaw had muttered once to her martial instructor. "Somebody ought to die for them, and it might as well be her."

This day the library was particularly busy. Deirdre counted the various requestors as they came in, taking in all the details she could in her brief glimpses between tasks. Three noble tigers in silk outfits, two wolves in military gear, a regal lion bearing many jewels, a lynx in pristine leather and hide, a falcon with many small ribbons decorating his legs, a hyena in a black hood...an unusual and high-status assortment to be sure, especially based on how...nice Master Sharpclaw was. Deirdre wasn't sure if "nice" was the word, but it was certainly more deferent.

What really confused Deirdre, though, was the books. What use did a royal-looking lion have with reading a highly technical architectural manual on building private gardens? Why would a proud tiger need deferent prayers to the deity of felines? She could imagine rare cases where there might be genuine interest, and she knew how awful it was for a cow like her to concern herself with that most privileged of questions "Why?", but Deirdre couldn't shake the feeling there was an ulterior motive.

Something in her walk betrayed her, or her brown eyes shone the truth like a beacon. "Cow." The word came from behind the librarian's desk, the elderly wolf staring her down with a hunter's gaze that made Deirdre immediately swallow and bow.

"Master Shar-"

"This is greater than you. You know that, right?"

Deirdre closed her eyes. "O-of course. All things are greater than me." The response was trained, but her voice gave it an honest weight.

The wolf stroked his chin, leaning back into his pillow-softened chair. "You do your faith proud, cow, when you remember things like that," he rumbled. "So tell me, penitent cow...how do you choose which gods to give your most regular worship to?"

"The god of your blood, the god of your duty, and the god of your fate."

"Good, good. And how do those apply to you?"

"The god of my blood is Bov, born for total subservience to my superiors. My fate, as is all prey, is owed to Felpar and Cane and the other predator gods."

"And your duty?"

Deirdre paused. There was no prey god for librarians or books, surely. That was the role of the scavengers at best, Proc and Corvel, and of the domain of those who were worthy of

such power. There was no way she could be presumptuous enough to consider a duty above where she stood in the order of things. The thought paralyzed her and made her unable to find words.

The librarian wolf smirked. He'd been around the cow long enough to know how frozen she got when it came to actual decisions about herself or direction. But it confirmed his suspicion. "You are without duty, cow. You are an empty vessel at best." Deirdre felt a humiliated blush rising to her cheeks, coloring her ears with unpleasant warmth. "...but, an empty vessel can be filled. And, as is the way of power and the order of things, it is those who first strike that reap the rewards. And so, as a true predator, I shall see what sort of vessel you are, cow."

Deirdre dared to glance up, fingers rubbing at the flesh just beneath her holy collar. "Master?"

"Go and reshelve the historical texts near the left reading room. I believe a researcher yesterday misplaced a great many of them. And while you're there...use that brain of yours and remember what you happen to overhear."

Deirdre's mouth opened, then closed. This was greater than her. Of course. But...was he asking her to eavesdrop? Then, her eyes widened, body stiffening as an electric current ran down her spine. Was this...his way of allowing her to appease her curiosity? The wolf's eyes were unmoving, steady, unflinching. There was no way to tell. Even if there was, the exact same response was demanded of her. "Y-yes! Master Sharpclaw."

The only delay in her escape was a brief trip to scan the return carts and grab the two Vulrok historical texts that needed to be brought to her destination. Her hooves clattered against the wooden floor panels as she sped through the aisles. The brief thought at how unwelcome her presence might be brought her to a steadier pace, quieting her approach. She blended into the background as the historical shelves loomed before her. As she neared, her ear flicked; words drifted from the nearby meeting room.

"...fourteen skirmishes along the southern border, two scouts and eight soldiers dead. Masylya is becoming bolder at repelling our prods." It was an even voice, calm and collected.

"Acceptable losses. Especially seeing as they're getting killed by lower species more often than not. Did you know one of the border captains is a mouse? A mouse! What a disgraceful sight." That voice was haughty, clearly rich with pride and excess.

"A mouse that apparently knows how to organize and fight, sir." A third voice, precise and sharp, made its comment without judgement or airs.

"Pah! Any predator that loses to that should be declawed. Death is getting off easy." The fourth, rumbling and low, demanding authority and obedience.

"Squirrels and mice make for good skirmishers, Duke Dovoriq. Were they not threats, they would not be worthy prey. True predators will rise to take them down, but do not speak ill of those that do not. Their glories will eventually end up claimed by those of honored blood." The first voice again seemed ambitious in its words even if its cool, unbothered tone went unchanged. No rebuke came from the fourth voice.

Deirdre listened, the conversation not surprising her. Based on what she knew, Masylya had become Vulrok's main rival of late. Bordering the country, opposed to their ways, the forest-dwellers' rise in military service had predictable results. No longer could "hunts" across the

border be taken lightly. She pretended to deliberate over the placement of her two books, but the slots were obvious and the rest of the shelves in perfect order. She carefully watched the shelves, after all, and wouldn't have allowed them to remain disorganized prior to her retiring for the night. She chanced a glance to the meeting room to form the briefest of pictures.

Most of the visitors she'd seen before were there. The main voices seemed to be the lynx, one of the tigers, the falcon, and a lion, all seated around a wooden conference table. The two other tigers and one of the wolves were seated away from them, while the second wolf sat silently among the other speakers. Deirdre let her gaze linger for a mere second, and instantly the lynx's eyes seemed to snap and directly meet hers. The cow immediately shifted her brown eyes back to the books, more nervous sweat building on her neck. But no other motion or sound of notice came from the room.

"Their patrols seemed to be made on a quarter-day rotation," the sharp voice reported, Deirdre now imagining it to have been the decorated falcon. "They have night-hunting species in their moonlight patrols, so even our stealthiest hunting bands occasionally are forced into awkward engagements."

"Have we gained anything from these? Any *actual* victories?" The rumbling voice must have been the tiger, Deirdre concluded. She assumed him Duke Dovariq, one of the highest-ranking members of a well-honored and large tiger family in the Vulrok aristocracy.

"Four complete victories out of fourteen. Nine acquisitions for The Great Hunt four awaiting evaluation, one officer being interrogated over long-term torture."

"Excellent!" cried the haughty voice, jovial in tone. It couldn't have been anyone but the lion. "Between this and our scoutmaster's cousin's work, this shall be a Great Hunt indeed!"

"Your words honor the Cunning family, Mayor." The cool voice was obviously the lynx. Deirdre figured it was time to actually slide one of the books she had back into place.

"And what about you, Rowan? Do you consider these to be victories?"

The question from the clearly disgusted tiger brought a monetary silence. Deirdre imagined the stares and pressure placed upon the individual who had yet to speak. Who else could it be but the wolf? Seconds passed, almost half-a-minute, before a bass-toned grumble issued forth.

"They are. But not ones worth celebrating. We only can claim to be predators once the border is ours to once more hunt and pressure freely. We need not conquer, only break."

"Good. I'm glad you agree." The Duke almost sounded pleased. "So then, as I proposed, we press in with four units and burn their border encampments. Crush them with due strength, no survivors. A clear message of dominance."

Deirdre thought the previous silence was deafening, but this one was far worse. The cow could hear the blood pumping in her ears, her heart's nervous beat, and the soft shuffle of pages elsewhere nearby. When she decided to slide her second book in, the sound of book binding scuffing across wood might as well have been a hurricane compared to the lack of noise. Wincing, she took it as her cue to stumble her way back to the front desk. Behind her, she heard the shuffling of chairs as the meeting silently dismissed.

The cow returned to her small stool nearby the front desk and sat down, the old wolf busying himself with a scroll and not affording her even the slightest of glances. Holding onto information and secrets was hardly her forte, so she distracted herself from the wait by going over the scene in her head. The silence after the Duke's proposal must've been accompanied

by an awkward scene. Agreement wouldn't have taken so long or been so wordless. Were they grimacing in unease? Uncertain? Holding back critique? And what was there to critique? With an all-out assault and withdrawal..would that result in-...

"Master Sharpclaw, your library is meticulously cared for."

Deirdre glanced up. Duke Dovariq stood before the front desk. Behind him stood the various individuals in the meeting, most with proud poise with only the lynx's being less-than-attentive. Or perhaps she was distracted? The wolf librarian glanced up at the comment, both wolf and cow recognizing the simple fact that the comment was a statement of fact and not a compliment. The wolf simply chose to respond as if it were. "Thank you, your Grace."

The tiger sneered, eyes snapping to gaze at the large girl upon her stool. Deirdre's head immediately bowed, eyes averted for the moment. "You have an unusual taste in book-runner, though. Clearly dutiful, but...shockingly chosen." He turned back to the wolf, and Deirdre snuck a glance back to the scene. The tiger's tail was whipping behind him. "Did you choose her for emergency rations, or because she'd do the dirty work without asking?"

The wolf's gaze narrowed. "She does good work. The church initiates are often too full of themselves to bother putting the work first."

"Yes, yes, of course. And I suppose you're too full of yourself to think we wouldn't notice a fucking cow listening in for you." The air turned icy, the Duke's lip curled in anger. "Someone did not properly teach you your place, it seems."

The tiger's paw whipped out, snatching the wolf's wrist and yanking forward. Deirdre gasped as the quill fell from the librarian's fingers, Duke Dovariq twisting the hand in his grip. Master Sharpclaw gritted his teeth from the pain, but that wasn't enough for the noble. His other arm's elbow came up and was quickly forced downwards, aimed at the wolf's forearm.

The prayer that leapt to mind in Deirdre's head was instant, a minutes long mantra of self-sacrifice and love. It was something she'd read in a old Church scroll once, a faded copy that resonated in her soul. As she watched the scene, she couldn't help herself from reciting it in a whisper. At least, she thought she was whispering it. But minutes did not fit into a second.

The library's air filled with a crack, the sound of snapping bone, and a scream. All eyes widened in shock at the scene.

The tiger's elbow had smashed into the wolf's forearm as intended, the arm bent and seemingly broken between it and the top of the librarian's desk. The wolf's expression, however, was surprised yet painless. When the Duke released him, the arm looked entirely intact. It was then that they all bothered to focus on the cow. Now writhing on the floor and sobbing, her right arm was contorted. The sleeve had been pulled back, revealing a jutting bulge from where her arm bent in one too many places. The skin was quickly growing bloated and purple, not unlike her increasingly tear-stained face. The crowd of predators watched as she bit her lip, blood dribbling from the flesh there. Six or seven huffs of pained air sounded from her nostrils before, clutching her broken arm, she stumbled her way upright. Her body slammed against the back wall, sliding down before she finally refound her seat upon the stool. Deirdre's entire form was trembling, heaving with breaths of agony, but she sat, quieter than they could have expected anyone to be merely a minute after such an injury.

Then, an even more unexpected thing happened. Deirdre spoke without being spoken to. “D-do not p-p-punish M-Master Sh-Sharpclaw for my f-f-f-failings,” she spluttered, head bowed to hide her reddened eyes. “I-I am the one w-who thought myself higher. I-I even questioned your plan, y-y-your grace.”

Duke Dovariq looked at the creature. The cow’s words had encouraged more than a few of his day’s entourage to stagger a few steps backwards. The tiger’s tail whipped only ever faster. “Oh?” The word slipped out like a drop of venom, even if his expression did not change. “And what does meat like you think is wrong with my plan, then? Tell me, filth.”

“M-m-Master Rowan is right. Y-you only need to break. Y-your play would invite w-war, w-which is m-more costly th-than y-your short t-term goals r-require.”

The Duke began to slowly walk forward, striped body bared with rage. “Oh? And just what would you propose then, meat? And if you stutter one more time, I will gut you where you sit.”

Deirdre forced two breaths into her lungs, deeper than her body naturally wanted. She forced herself upright, and she forced her burning eyes to meet the steady predator’s gaze raining ire upon her. “I...would learn the patrol timings. Send a group of hunters when the next night patrol is a decent way into their route, cross the path behind them, attack the encampment while they’re out. If they...are using quarterly patrols, almost everyone there will be tired or weak. Kill or capture everyone, leave no trace of who did it. They would know it is the predators and might of Vulrok but have no proof. It would humiliate them and show the futility of a border encampment, and it would be less costly for us. There will be other times to prove...to prove prowess. But the pride and pack...would be most benefited right now by this sort of action.”

Duke Dovariq’s tail did not stop swishing, but his approach stopped. He loomed above the cow, glaring at her and affording the occasional glance to her arm. His teeth grit together. Finally, he glanced back to the crowd of gawking observers. “Cunning. Ferrous. Kire. What do you think of this meat’s noise?”

The lynx grimaced. “She is right. It would be most efficient to kill the weak and sick, break their spirit. War based on an open and brazen attack on our part could invite the worst-case scenario: an alliance between Masyiva and Svazame, and possibly even some of the Dominion.”

“Agreed. You heard my words but not my meaning, Duke,” the wolf said.

The falcon nodded. “It would be easy to do with most of their night-vision soldiers on patrol, too.”

The tiger narrowed his eyes. Eventually, he spun on his paws and returned to the desk. He didn’t bother to look at the still-astounded wolf. “Sharpclaw.” The word was spat. “You have played a dangerous game, using a meat shield like this. What is the name of this one that would use our very faith against me?”

“Her name is Deirdre Lyne.”

The tiger sighed and left, growling under his breath as he did. “Of course. Morgan’s. Should’ve known.”

The retinue soon followed, and, once the last one had exited, Master Sharpclaw pushed himself up from his seat and walked over to Deirdre. “You taught yourself the Prayer of Love?

You stupid, careless cow,” he said, voice far more tender than his words suggested. He knelt next to her, pushing the sleeve back up and brushing his fingers across the purple bulge. The cow recoiled, sobbing aloud at the painful shock. “You know, that sacerdotal mantra has not been used in this Church for a very long time, not since the last prey clergy died out. Yours is a unique mind to have found and learned it like that.”

His hands covered her arm, forcing a short scream from Deirdre as he pushed the bulge downward, broken bone jammed towards its proper place. Then, a soothing white light began to soak into the flesh, a slow mending permeating the bruised and misshapen arm. “To question Duke Dovariq...how uncharacteristic of you,” he mumbled. “Was it pain clouding your senses, or was it something else?”

“I l-live to s-serve, M-Master. A-and I d-do not want any more s-suffering than is needed.” Her words were coupled with soft sobs as the shame of her actions washed over her, the pain vanishing into the warm glow of the librarian’s white magic. “*If t-there is suffering, let me, the least of all, s-suffer instead.*”

“Hrm, yes. That is a line in our version, isn’t it,” the wolf mused, focusing as bone fused beneath his hands and strands of muscle regrew. He leaned in, biting the bulging flesh ever so slightly, a gush of red spurting out onto his robes and the floor as excess material and lost blood ejected from Deirdre’s body. Only once the massive discoloration had taken on a more normal purpled tone did his magic reseal the hole, forcing the nerves to quiet as he did so.

Master Sharpclaw released his hands, the sniffing cow’s arm still quite hurt but no longer a stomach-turning sight. “You are dismissed from your duties for the day,” he said, walking back to his desk. As Deirdre’s mouth opened to protest, he snatched a fresh piece of parchment from his desk and began to write. “I will not be refused, cow. You will take this note to the kitchens and take your dinner early. You will then take this note to the gardens and take the poultice they give you. You will return to your room and sleep. Tomorrow, you will skip your training duties and return to me to make up your work. I will write them to excuse your absence. Is that satisfactory, cow?”

Deirdre stared at the side of the wolf’s face as he wrote and talked, tears still blinking from the corners of her eyes and moistening her cheeks. He showed no emotion. Eventually, she was forced to bow her head for lack of a better response. “Y-yes, Master Sharpclaw. Your vision is above mine.”

As she steadily rose to her hooves, taking the note with her uninjured arm and feeling the ache as she impatiently tensed the fresh muscle, she muttered a “Thank you”. And as she left, her troublesome eavesdropping ear caught wind of the librarian’s own mutter. “Your vision is above mine’, huh? I really wonder...”

Monastery and Library of the Church of Tooth and Claw,

There is need of an agent both loyal and disposable to serve the interests of country and Church in a new territory. The Drifting Isles is proving to be busier and more resource-consuming than anticipated, and the only avenue into investigating these Isles’ outside of the Dominion’s irritatingly possessive fleets is through the local adventurer’s inn. We require you ship one cow by the name of Deirdre Lyne to report in secret to the embassy and Church official there regarding the operations of these adventurers and their findings.

Authorized by Duke Rowan Ferrous

"The Drifting Isles?"

The librarian nodded. "Yes. Vulrok has recently established an embassy there, and the Church of the Tooth and Claw had sent the honored Revya Cunning to establish a Church there before that too."

"Cunning? Is she..."

"Yes, the cousin of the lynx you overheard some weeks ago." He settled down into his chair, leaving the cow with the parchment in her hands. "She was impressed by your dedication to me and your judgment." The wolf chuckled to himself. "Apparently, once he had cooled down, Duke Dovariq also acknowledged your usefulness. And now that usefulness has gotten you drafted as some sort of spy, it seems. Congratulations, cow."

Deirdre reread the notice. Confusedly, she looked up. "Then...this is an honor?"

Master Sharpclaw nodded. "They trust you, at least enough to be a representative and...shall we say 'prying ear'?" The heifer blushed furiously at that, glancing away.

"I...will get ready. I am very sorry to have to leave you and my work here." Deirdre bowed deeply, trying her best not to cry at the prospect of leaving her life. Still, if this were an honor, she was sure she'd find the joys of such a different life soon enough.

As she marched her way to the doors, hands gripping at her sackcloth robes and rubbing the rough fabric between her fingers, she was stopped by a voice.

"Cow. I was wrong, by the way."

Her head turned, eyes blinking themselves clear. "Master?"

"You do have a duty, and this has now proven it. You will have another god to pray to."

He smiled. "Go with Cerv, Deirdre."

Cerv, the trailblazer. Of journeys and shelter. The god of willing sacrifice for his masters.

Deirdre's eyes welled up with tears. She couldn't find the voice to respond, so she bowed again and ran from the room. Bov, Felpar, Cane, and Cerv. She had a lot of prayers to say before she left. But, now, she finally saw herself in the grand scheme, and her place was one deserving of a name.